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Exploring High School Students' Attitudes Towards Reading

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Abstract

This study explored high school students' attitudes towards reading as both a recreational activity and academic endeavor; while there are numerous studies regarding the reading habits of younger children, there is a deficit of research into the reading habits of students beyond the middle school years. This study surveyed and interviewed freshmen-through-senior students in a medium-sized, rural Illinois high school about their habits as readers in order to explore the relationship between different environmental factors and reading, as well as between reading habits and college readiness. This study found a gender gap in reading enjoyment favoring female students; a decline in academic reading, but an increase in recreational reading, across grades nine through twelve; and that students have an unclear vision of what reading in college entails. The discussion of these findings give direction to English teachers, researchers and school leaders to re-examine the place reading should have in a high school curriculum.

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Exploring High School Students' Attitudes Towards Reading

Introduction

In my own practice as an English teacher of six years, I have felt the pressure to focus on standards mastery in my high school curriculum at the expense of building a love of reading through independent reading of self-selected books. I have a growing suspicion of how little teenagers are reading in general, given how difficult it has been to get students to complete reading assignments outside of class. Are some of the common practices of high school English classrooms helping or hindering teens' desire to read? This is an inquiry into the reading habits and preferences of teenagers at one Midwestern high school. A review of the literature and research on the reading habits of teenagers is needed to give context on this crucial question.

Literature Review

Reviewing literature on the subject from teachers and researchers around the world answers some questions and raises others. Reading, undoubtedly, is a lifelong skill for all learners and progress in reading is an important indicator of college readiness, but to what extent students are actually reading and which factors influence their attitudes on reading has been the subject of some emerging research, to which I intend to contribute through this project.

The Impact of Reading on College Readiness

In 2017, nearly two-thirds of U.S. high school students took the ACT, and of these students, slightly less than half demonstrated college readiness in reading. ACT noted also that some states have dropped state-wide administration of the ACT in recent years, so many students who do not wish to attend college are not reflected in this data.

Despite this, many of these students enrolled in two and four-year colleges, and depending on their state and institution, may have chosen to enroll or were placed in a remedial reading course, resulting in additional time and expense towards their degree. At four-year colleges, students from identical socioeconomic status (SES) and high school preparation background were about 11% less likely to graduate if they took a remedial reading course than if they did not, but at two-year colleges, students were about 11% more likely to graduate if they took a remedial reading course (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2016). These divisive statistics are only more complicated by the incomplete reporting from institutions and state boards of education of how many college students are enrolled in remedial courses.

Why so many students are able to graduate high school and enroll in college without the appropriate reading skills is a complex problem. One concern is that students enroll believing they are ready for college (and their grades may suggest so) while simultaneously acknowledging they lack the habits for success. For example, a survey of mostly college-bound high school seniors in a U.S. government class, who widely reported on the survey that they felt they could meet the challenges of college-level reading, also predominantly indicated that "20 minutes [of reading] was too long." (Hooley, Tysseling & Ray, 2013, p. 326). Additionally, these students acknowledged that reading was important, but doubted that their teachers actually expected them to do the assigned reading. More than half said they did not like to read in general. These researchers conclude:

The apparent contradictions between overt support for class reading combined with non-reading behaviors and the dearth of reading instruction reported from students and teachers suggests a conflicted situation where, although in theory reading may be an established part of the secondary

curriculum, in practice and in reality, it is not. The facade that reading is important and happening in the classroom seems to be not only masking but also enabling a perpetuating cycle of low reading expectations between teachers and students (Hooley, Tysseling & Ray, 2013, p. 331).

Many teachers, especially those of high school English, may presume that they hold students to high reading standards by regularly assigning whole-class novels and tying both reading and writing assessments to these books. However, many English teachers also experience the malaise of fake reading and superficial (or worse, plagiarized) writing about what they read. If students can pass English classes without actually building grade-appropriate skills in reading as the ACT and prevalence of college remedial reading classes suggest, then researchers and teachers must identify where we have gone wrong in the teaching of reading, and how we can better support our students.

Which Students Are Reading, and How Much?

How much students are reading recreationally has significantly decreased over the last thirty years and continues to decrease for students individually as they move through elementary, middle and high school. A national study indicates that in 2010, for instance, children of all ages are reading for pleasure an average of less than an hour per day, and the duration decreases as age increases. Additionally, the same data shows a breakdown of total reading for pleasure and specifically reading books for pleasure. Consistently, books account for about two-thirds of the total reading time (Rideout, 2014, p. 11). As one might expect, these numbers have significantly declined over the last few decades, especially in older children. Thirty years ago, two-thirds of older teens read at least once a week, but in this decade that number is less than half. More alarmingly, where only about a fifth of older teens read a few times a year or less in the 1980s, now closer to half

read that infrequently (Rideout, 2014, p. 14). The patterns are clear: children, and especially teenagers, are experiencing a significant decline in their reading volume.

While the report that cites this national study does not include the methodology of that specific study or the demographic information of the participants, other recent studies indicate that how much students are reading recreationally varies depending on such uncontrollable factors as sex, SES, and whether the school is in an urban or rural district. Researchers in Texas administered a popular reading attitudes scale to over 2,500 Texas high school students to determine students' behaviors and attitudes regarding reading. By their metric, the mean score was only slightly above average for all participants (Buusert-Webb & Zhang, 2016, p. 433). However, the mean scores varied among subgroups depending on several factors. Contrary to a pervasive myth and the hypothesis of the researchers, urban students of low SES were the demographic that had the most positive attitudes towards reading. In fact, the only hypothesis supported by the data were that "significant differences appeared between overall reading attitude and gender" with female respondents reporting more positive attitudes towards reading than their male peers (Buusert-Webb & Zhang, 2016, p. 433). While the size of the school did not yield significant differences in reading attitudes, urban school students felt more positively about reading than their rural counterparts (Buusert-Webb & Zhang, 2016, p. 433). The researchers speculated that rural schools' limited access to books because of distant libraries, as well as lower populations that led to less funding for books, resulted in the differences. Perhaps the most significant finding from the Texas study, however, is that students of high SES had a much lower attitude mean than students of low SES, contrary to the researcher's hypothesis and commonly held assumptions (Buusert-Webb

& Zhang, 2016, p. 433). How many commonly-held beliefs about reading these researchers recently disproved in Texas warrants replication of this study in other regions. We know our students' reading habits are changing drastically, and a shift in our understanding of their attitudes should follow suit.

Influencing Factors on High School Students' Attitudes Towards Reading

While individual students have different combinations of factors influencing their feelings about reading and their choices and ability to read, there are a few common forces of influence present in the literature: peers, family, English teachers, language acquisition, and student exceptionalities.

Peers and family influences. Parents, teachers and school counselors will often point to peer pressure as a factor in many teenagers' behavior choices, but how influential is this peer pressure on reading habits? Researchers in Australia collected survey data from children between 13-16 years of age in twenty high schools across Western Australia to answer this question. Their results indicate that "there was a low positive correlation between adolescents' attitudes toward recreational book reading and perceived friends' attitudes toward the practice," but in a gender breakdown of the data, when it comes to recreational reading, "girls may not be as susceptible to social influence from friends as boys" (Merga, 2016, p. 134). Stated differently, girls will mostly likely read regardless of what their friends think of reading, but boys are more likely to read or not read depending on what their friends think of reading. Even among the boys, however, peer pressure was not a significantly influential factor when it comes to recreational reading.

However, family influence matters significantly. The same study found that a child with parents that read frequently and/or demonstrate positive attitudes about reading will report the same behavior and feelings about reading (Merga, 2016, p. 133). The support of interested parents, who shared enthusiasm for books, talked to their children about their reading, gave books as gifts, and modelled regular reading had a significantly positive influence. Common Sense Media in the United States also found that “the most recent studies indicate that the time spent reading or being read to increases with age among young children, then decreases sharply among tweens and teens” (Rideout, 2014, p. 10). These U.S. findings support the Australian researchers’ conclusions that parents tend to withdraw support from reading once literacy has been achieved, often in elementary school, and suggest that “parents must continually expect that students read for recreation and provide ongoing encouragement and support” in order to raise avid readers (Merga, 2016, p. 135). As in all areas of curriculum, the importance of parental involvement in a child’s reading development at all levels cannot be overstated.

English teachers and instructional practices. The development of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has created significant debate about the role of recreational reading in the English language arts classroom. As one author put it:

...it [recreational reading] is buried so far out of the sight of teachers and curriculum directors that it will be all but forgotten...it doesn’t matter how much effort teachers put into teaching the anchor reading standards if our students don’t read. And if we don’t create environments where our students are reading lots of books, they will never become the kinds of readers we want them to be. They will simply remain test takers (and not very good test takers at that)” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 55).

This teacher’s prediction that this preoccupation with the standards and not the actual reading will result in poor learning and poor standardized test results is likely based on

his experiences with a decade's worth of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates. For instance, in Illinois, over the period between 2003 and 2014, no significant change occurred in the percent of students passing the reading or mathematics test on the Prairie State Achievement Exam despite the stability of the instrument used and the very complete data gathered from the Illinois School Report Cards for every district over that ten-year period (Harman, Boden, Karpenski, & Muchowicz, 2016, pp. 3-7). The authors of this study concluded that this significant failure of NCLB to meet its goal of all students graduating high school proficient in reading and math scores on the state's chosen instrument of measure suggest that "the program of focusing schooling on state-mandated standards for core skill areas of reading and math, measured by standardized tests, is a failed experiment" (Harman, Boden, Karpenski, & Muchowicz, 2016). They also suggest two other possibilities to explain the failures that are particularly relevant to the value of recreational reading. First, they suggest the learning standards then and now (CCSS) are not as unilaterally relevant to communities as their developers claim:

It is possible that regular people and their communities do not actually desire for their children what is expected from the standards...If irrelevance is a central issue in the failure of NCLB, it could be argued that such [Common Core] consortiums and professional educators are a tiny fraction of the stakeholders who need to be consulted to create effective curricula, standards, and assessments. No matter what schools demand, communities will be the ones to determine the actual outcomes (Harman, Boden, Karpenski, & Muchowicz, 2016, p. 18).

The numerous, rigorous literary analysis standards that are part of the 11-12th grade ELA Reading Literature thread of the CCSS are a perfect example of this. It is infinitely more important that students enter college with the reading stamina and skill to tackle the average undergraduate reading load across several different disciplines than that they are

prepared for one college literature course. The researchers suggested another possibility to explain the failure of Illinois schools in the NCLB era:

The belief that the most valuable elements of an education are amenable to being serialized into atomized skills may be incorrect. What is known and widely accepted in neuropsychology and in education scholarship about human learning is that it is constructed, dialogic, and involves development of holistic meaning. Reading, critical thinking, creativity and problem solving may be phenomenological rather than 'skills based.' If this is so, any skills approach to educating the population to be habitual and adept practitioners of such processes may be a dead end (Harman, Boden, Karpenski, & Muchowicz, 2016, p. 18).

The Illinois researchers' and Gallagher's conclusions echo what students themselves see as valuable. The Western Australia survey of teenage readers found that "students identified strategies for choice, access to attractive and diverse books, time availability, time allocation, concentration and encouragement" as key factors in developing their proclivity to read (Merga, 2016, p. 134). Our classroom practices cannot be mutually exclusive of what our students need from us to become readers.

Difficulties with literacy and language. While all of the previous literature addresses general populations of students, the diversity of needs and backgrounds in an English language arts classroom call for a differentiation of strategies to keep up with all students' reading instruction. One prevalent problem with reading instruction in secondary English language arts is a lack of fluency by the time students enter high school. There is a significant link between reading fluency and comprehension, and to enter middle and high school with underdeveloped fluency presents a litany of challenges for students (Paige, 2014). For instance, while elementary reading teachers acknowledge the reading level of texts presented to students, this concept is less routinely considered as the student moves through middle and high school, where students are required to read

textbooks that are at or above grade level. Many secondary educators assume students will fall behind if they don't push through the required grade-level readings, but the opposite is frequently true. These students struggle to decode and comprehend the content of the text, and they not only fall further behind in reading but often fail to learn the required material. Researchers have concluded that students at this level would fare better if texts were presented to them at reading levels more appropriate to their development (Stover, O'Rear & Morris, 2015, p. 66).

Many adolescent students who struggle with reading avoid reading tasks in ways that are perceived as apathy or rebellion. They may face significant challenges throughout the school day if they are regularly expected to read and comprehend texts beyond their grade level abilities if they are not fluent.

For even fluent readers, some of the texts they will encounter require the learning of new syntax, vocabulary, morphemes, and ideas written with multiple meanings...The current trend across classrooms in the U.S....is to lead students in higher order and strategic thinking about the content we teach. Unfortunately, it is very difficult for a reader to critically consider a text which they struggle to read (Stover, O'Rear, & Morris, 2015, p. 66).

Providing training for all teachers of reading across content levels to employ fluency strategies with struggling readers and providing access to course content through more grade-level appropriate readings is essential in closing the gap for college-readiness.

English language learners are especially vulnerable to struggles with reading beyond elementary grades. "Despite the growing number of English Language Learners [ELLs] in the U.S. school system and increased attention to providing appropriate educational opportunities, adolescent ELLs continue to underachieve in English literacy" as about three quarters of ELLs scored below basic on reading achievement tests

compared to only about one quarter of their non-ELL peers in a recent study (Klingner, Boardman, Eppolito, & Schonewise, 2012, p. 36). Just as native speakers often lose access to reading fluency strategies that were emphasized in elementary school, “many newcomers are placed in grade-level content-area classrooms beyond the time when basic literacy is taught, and they are expected to use literacy skills they do not yet possess to comprehend content area material” (Klingner, Boardman, Eppolito, & Schonewise, 2012, p. 37). It is essential that high school teachers support their ELL students through language and fluency instruction and supports, and that school districts support their teachers with the appropriate training and intervention resources to do so.

All students have the right to a viable curriculum, and we have a duty to help these students make connections to others and their world through reading. Students who struggle with reading due to lack of fluency or language acquisition must not be thought of as “nonreaders” by their teachers, especially in English class. If we in high school classrooms can reignite the interest and stamina for reading that many students leave behind in elementary and middle school and continue to support those who have not found it yet, more students will be ready for college and, more importantly, become lifelong readers and learners.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the project was based on the landmark study of The Matthew Effect (Stanovich, 1986) and research from Clark and De Zoysa (2011) that asserts a direct relationship between reading behavior and enjoyment with attainment. Stanovich’s landmark study of the Matthew Effect in reading (1986) argues that the “major individual differences in the development of reading skill is the volume of reading

experience,” resulting in strongest readers at the outset getting stronger as they progress and the weakest readers falling further behind (p. 380). This phenomenon was explored further in a large-scale study by Clark and De Zoysa (2011), who ultimately found evidence that enjoying reading is related to attainment in comprehension, grammar and vocabulary (p. 7) and that the evidence is even clearer that “positive reading attitudes are linked to achievement” (Clark & De Zovsa, 2011, p. 8). For instance, longitudinal studies of fourth-graders’ reading habits revealed that those who said they read for fun at least once a month attained significantly higher scores on a standardized reading test than those who said they rarely read for fun.

Methods

Design

This study used a qualitative approach to explore students’ attitudes towards reading, the causes of these attitudes and the reading behaviors affected by these attitudes.

Sample/Participants

Approximately 1000 high school students were invited to participate in this study. The current student body of the school has the following demographics: 48% of students are eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches, 16% of the students have disabilities, and 1% are English Language Learners. The racial/ethnic diversity breakdown of the population is: 82% Caucasian, 6% African American, 3% Latino, 1% Asian, and 8% two or more races.

Setting

The study was conducted in English classes in West Central Illinois. Because all students are required to pass four years of English as a graduation requirement, 100% of the student body were invited to participate in the survey. The nine general education English classrooms and three to four special education English classrooms host all students in the school at least once a day.

Data Source and Instruments

Two instruments were used in the study. The instruments are as follows:

1. An updated version of the The Tullock-Rhody Secondary Reading Attitudes Assessment (1980)
2. Semi-structured interviews

Data Collection

1. Surveys were administered online by English teachers to their students during January of 2019. Students responded digitally by selecting responses or typing in answers to open-ended questions. A variation on the Tullock-Rhody Secondary Reading Attitudes Assessment (1980) was utilized. Most questions were selected-response items with some Likert-scale options (e.g., “strongly disagree” through “strongly agree”). Items L, U, V, and W were the open-response questions (Appendix A).
2. Semi-structured interviews with 4 students from each grade level 9-12 (n=16) were conducted during the schoolwide advisory period in a classroom in March 2019. Students who volunteered to participate by

leaving their name on the survey were chosen randomly in numbers that reflected the age, gender, racial and special education demographics of the school, e.g., half boys and half girls, equal numbers of students from each grade level, etc. The questions asked were focused on experiences in middle-school reading and high school reading, perceptions of friends' reading habits, reading practices in English classrooms, and the relationship between reading and college (Appendix B).

Data Collection and Analysis

Survey access and directions were provided to English teachers in January 2019 with a one-month window for completion at the teacher's discretion. Interview participants were chosen at random from the students who left their names as consent to be interviewed in proportion to the grade, gender, and racial/ethnic demographics of the school and scheduled during the participant's study hall or advisory period. Each interview was transcribed and coded to keep the information confidential. Participants are identified in the findings by pseudonyms. Interview transcripts were analyzed and coded to find common themes.

Findings

The survey data and the interview transcripts were congruous in the narrative they present of the potential causes and effects of high school students' attitudes towards reading. While the interviews allowed students to think aloud and elaborate on their experiences with reading, their individual conclusions were largely reflected in the large-scale picture of reading at this school captured in the compiled survey data.

Interview Findings

Students read more, less, or the same amount in high school than they did in middle school at very similar rates. Nearly equal numbers of students reported that they read more ($n = 4$; 25%), less ($n = 6$; 38%) or the same amount ($n = 5$; 31%) at the time of the interview than they did in middle school, while one other student indicated that she read more at school but less at home. Among those who read less, about half ($n = 3$; 19%) identified “work” or “homework” as a cause of the decline; only one student cited her extracurricular activities (“sports”); one said it was because he did not “have any good books”; and one male junior, Stanley (all names are pseudonyms), explained that “whenever I’m forced to read a book it makes me not want to read, and then I’m not in the mood to read.” This suggests that students generally viewed reading as a recreational, or at least a non-homework activity, and while some are still making time to read recreationally, others feel a lack of agency to do so.

Among those students that indicated they read the same amount or more, explanations varied. A senior boy said that “I read more now because I found a book I like and reading is not as bad as a lot of people see [sic], so I decided to keep on reading. Now I prefer to read over watching TV,” while a sophomore girl explained that “we have to read more because a lot of it is assigned. In junior high I could pick up a book and read it at my own pace. We are always reading in class now.” It is of note that the interview question did not specify reading at home or at school, or reading that was assigned versus reading for pleasure, or define what kind of reading (e.g., books versus online news articles). It could be inferred that students who identified “homework” as a cause of their reading decline did not include reading assignments as “reading” as they

responded. Students' explanations for why they read the same amount or more demonstrate a variety of experiences with reading both in and outside of classes.

All students interviewed expressed a desire for choice in their book selection. Students unanimously expressed a preference for independent reading in English class over more limited approaches (the whole-class novel or selecting from a few book club options) to reading units during their interviews ($n = 16$; 100%). Even students who indicated they did not read much or finish assigned reading outside of school were observed nodding vigorously when asked if they would be more likely to read an independently-chosen book over one that teachers assigned to the whole class. Students who elaborated made similar points about the importance of choice; for example, Stanley said that "I like being able to choose what I can read," and a junior girl said that a book she chose would be "more [her] style." Michael, a junior boy, even stated it this way: "I'd be so more likely to read an independent book than a whole-class book. Because choice is like a drug: it's addictive." Clearly, high school students would like more agency in selecting the books they read in English classes, which a wealth of past research has suggested is important to learning for language arts classes.

Though the idea of independent reading garnered the most enthusiasm from the interviewed students, the book club model was a close second. Students largely responded positively to the idea of book clubs, which were defined as groups of students choosing a book to read together from a set of options ($n = 14$; 88%). It is of note, however, that many students had not experienced book clubs yet, because their school only uses the model in the junior and senior English curricula. Nonetheless, even these younger students frequently nodded as they said they liked the idea of book clubs better

than whole-class book study. The outliers were three older students who were currently in book clubs. Michael said he was more likely to read a whole-class text than a book club book. He elaborated:

...discussing a book is difficult sometimes. You have to make sure you're on the same page as someone else. It could be interpreted multiple ways. The story is for the reader. In book clubs you can share your personal views, but sometimes arguments can come up, and that's more uncomfortable than when a whole class text is assigned.

Holly, a senior girl said, "If I read with the class or other peers, you [sic] don't get stuff done" as explanation for why she would rather read a whole-class novel than read in a book club, though her top choice was independent reading. While Pam, the other senior girl interviewed, said that she would be more likely to read in a book club than in a whole-class book study. Pam also added in response to another question that in a recent English unit, "two out of five people didn't even read the book club book." It could be inferred that students primarily value choice and independence in how their English classes approach book studies, but some students may struggle with balancing the interpersonal aspects of small group approaches.

The theme of choice came up repeatedly in students' suggestions for their English teachers. Half of the students ($n = 8$; 50%) mentioned choice when asked what their English teachers could do to "help [them] read more or enjoy reading more." They expressed this through asking for more "options," asking "let me pick," or for more "independent reading." It should be noted that this question followed the prior discussion of book study preferences, which may have led the ideas of independent reading and choice to be top of mind for students. A quarter of students ($n = 4$; 24%) suggested "better" or "more modern" books, presumably for whole-class book study. Other

responses asked for more teacher guidance, such as suggesting that English teachers “talk about books or reference books more, I guess. Throughout the daily routine [my English teacher] could reference books”; “have more independent talks about more books or genres”; and “try to find something that someone likes, because I hear all the time that people say they don’t like reading, but then they find something they like, and their whole thought about it is switched.” It is worth noting that nearly all students’ responses to this question centered on the selection of books ($n = 15$; 94%). The one exception was a female freshman student who suggested an activity-based change, that “maybe [English teachers] could make me write down what I’m reading to make sure I’m comprehending it better.” Once again, high school students would like more agency in selecting the books they read in English classes.

The value of reading for college was clear to students, but they are not as certain about what kind of post-secondary reading they will do. All students ($n = 16$; 100%) indicated that reading was important for college and/or a career, even if they had no specific career goal in mind yet. However, students were much more vague in their responses or unrealistic in their expectations of what kind of reading would be needed for college or the training for their career, even if they had already declared a field or major of interest. Students who elaborated described the value of reading to their futures as useful for assignments, vocabulary, comprehension of career jargon, deepening conversation, and understanding current events, or just for “life in general.” There was an age divide between students with a specific and realistic expectation of the types of reading needed for college or their career training and those without. Only half of the juniors and seniors interviewed ($n = 4$; 50%) identified a specific type of reading, such as

the phrase “journal articles” rather than the more generic “articles,” “anatomy and physiology books” instead of “big textbooks,” and “computer languages like Java” instead of “instructional reading.” The rest of the students provided nonspecific responses such as those previously listed, responded that they were unsure, or had unrealistic expectations of the types of reading required. For example, two seniors had identified specific career goals but had vague or unrealistic expectations of the type of reading they would do in those college majors. Holly, who identified herself as multiracial in the survey, wants to be a veterinarian but responded that she would have to read “mainly books about animals and the health of an animal’s body.” Andy, a male student who has an IEP and who identified himself as Black in the survey, wants to go into business management but responded that he would have to read “probably some English, history and textbooks for studying, maybe science” in his college classes. It is also worth noting that all the students who identified a specific and realistic type of reading identified themselves as White, and none of them have IEPs. One inference that could explain this might be a lack of familiarity with the expectations of college among traditionally underrepresented racial minorities and students with special needs. Most students across all four grade levels were unclear of what they will be expected to read in college, despite their statements that reading will be important in some way.

The students interviewed also had inaccurate assumptions about the amount of reading that is expected in college. A first-year college student can expect to read about 5,000 pages a year, or approximately 167 pages a week (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018, p. 7). However, when asked for this weekly estimate, none of the male students estimated high enough, and only one female student (who has already taken a community college

nursing course) estimated correctly. In total, only one student, a white, senior female student without an IEP, had a realistic expectation of the amount of reading college requires ($n = 1$; 6%). Additionally, the next closest estimate from a female student (200-300 pages per week) was tempered by her admission that she did not think she would be prepared to read that amount by the time she was old enough for college, and she is a freshman. Among the boys, the estimates ranged from 10 pages a week to 100-150 pages a week, but the girls' responses varied much more widely, ranging from 15-20 pages to 500-1000 pages per week. Overall, most students ($n = 13$; 81%) estimated too low.

However, the majority also indicated that they would be ready to read the amount they predicted by the time they were old enough for college ($n = 13$; 81%). Of the other three, one student also clarified that she may be able to read that amount, but not "at that level." These findings are valuable in the context of the high number of students who drop out of college in their first year and the emphasis high schools place on college as the best post-secondary choice for graduates. Students may feel ready enough to enroll in college, but they are largely mistaken as to what "ready" means. The survey data confirms many of these findings.

Survey Findings

Students took the survey online during their English classes. They were incentivized to complete the survey through the possibility of having their name drawn for a gift card, but they were not required to complete it, and not all teachers had time for their classes to participate at all. In total, nearly half of the student body ($n = 441$; 47%) submitted a survey response. The survey findings largely match the interview findings.

Students' attitudes towards reading varied by sex. Students reported their levels of agreement on a Likert scale that ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" with a variety of first-person statements about reading. Female students reported greater enjoyment of reading than male students.

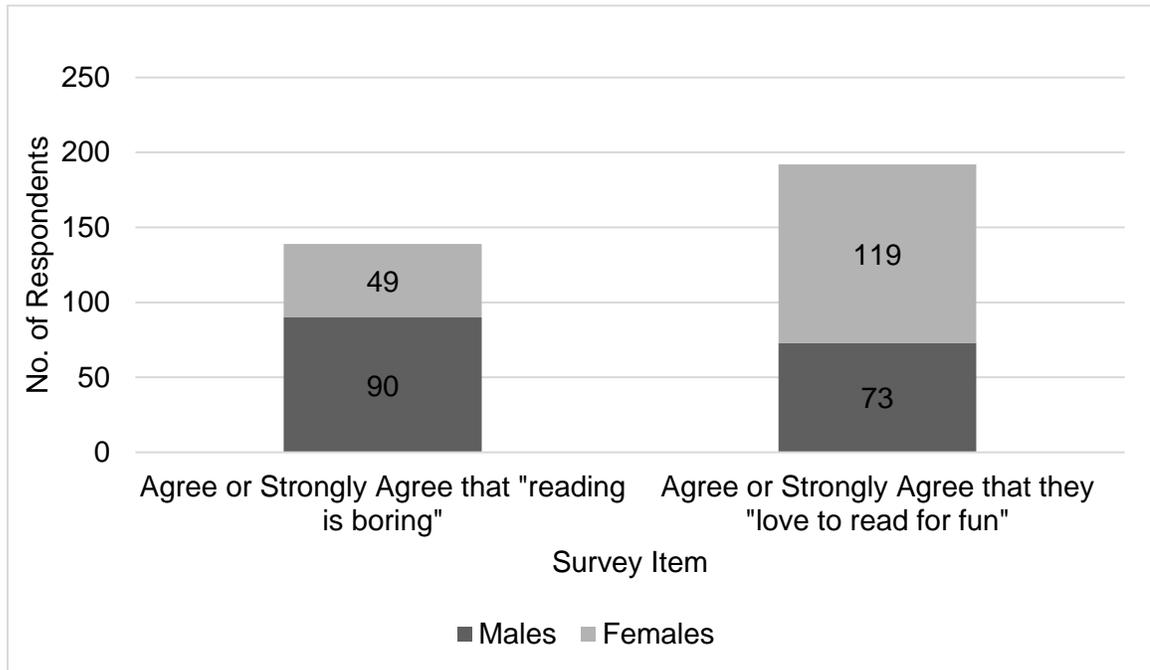


Figure 1. Perceptions of Reading by Sex

While nearly half of the male students ($n = 90$; 41%) either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement "I think reading is boring, only less than one-quarter of the female students ($n = 24$; 22%) did so. Conversely, over half of the female students ($n = 119$; 54%) somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement "I love to read books for fun," but only a third of the male students ($n = 73$; 33%) did so. Equal numbers of students indicated they identified as "male" ($n = 217$) and "female" ($n = 217$) on the survey. These findings suggest a notable gender gap in the perception of reading as an enjoyable activity. Influential factors may include male perceptions of the nature of reading as too

feminine an activity for boys. Also, K-12 classroom teachers typically praise silence and stillness during reading time and punish disruption, which may disproportionately impact boys and leave a lasting negative attitude towards reading as a result.

Despite the gender differences, there is an upward trend across grades 9-12 in how many students report a love of reading; in other words, upperclassmen reported greater reading enjoyment than underclassmen. While about a third of freshmen and sophomores love to read for fun, about half of juniors and seniors do.

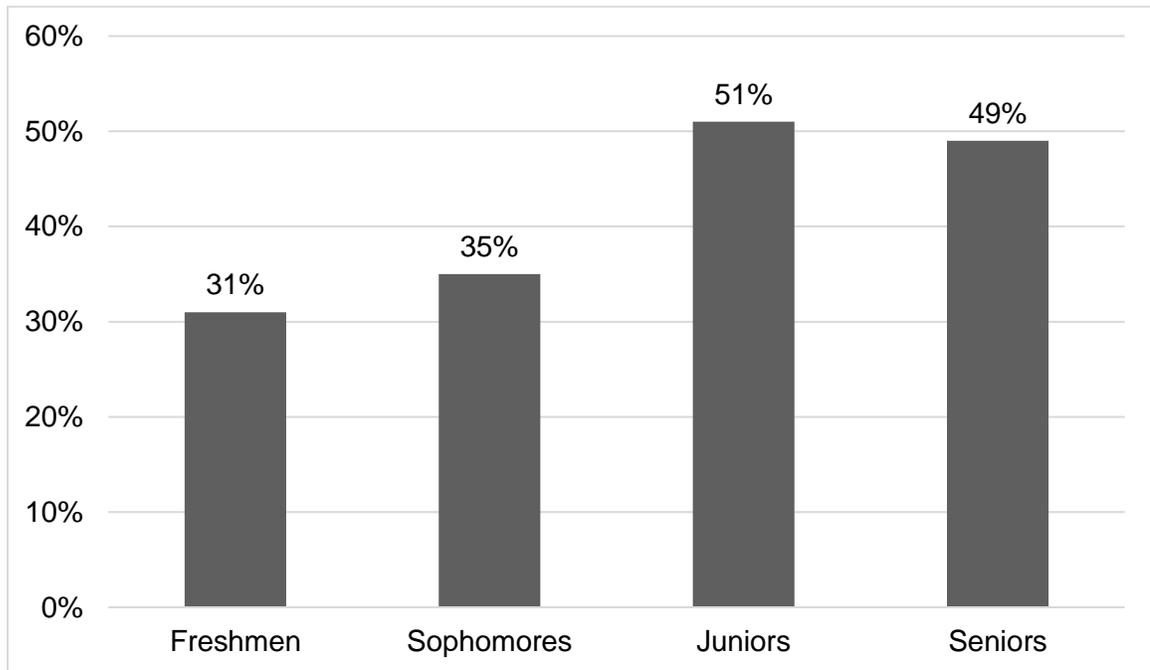


Figure 2. Perceptions of Reading by Grade Level

While slightly less than one-third of freshmen somewhat or strongly agreed that “they love to read books for fun” ($n = 31$; 31%), the number was higher for sophomores ($n = 32$; 35%). About half of juniors ($n = 46$; 51%) and seniors ($n = 79$; 49%) somewhat or strongly agreed. It should be noted that due to time and curriculum constraints for the junior English teachers, there were more honors and Advanced

Placement students represented in the junior year participants than in the other grade levels, which might be reflected in the sharper rise in their love of reading for that grade level, interrupting an otherwise steady increase.

The amount of students who love to read is mostly inverted with the students who rarely read. While the term “rarely” was not quantified in the survey, many students agreed that they “rarely read” except when they “have to for school assignments.” Conversely to how student love of reading seemed to increase across grades 9-12, the percent of students who “rarely read” seemed to decline at about the same rate.

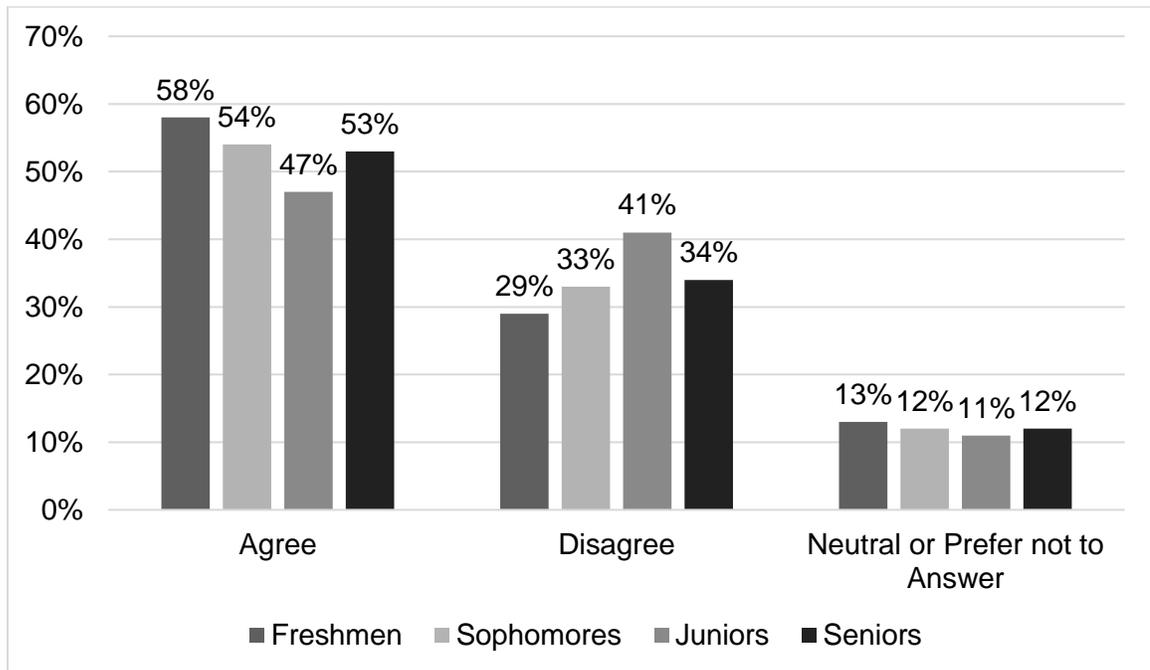


Figure 3. Students Who "Rarely Read" by Grade Level

The trend across grade levels of students who somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement matches the trend of students who said they loved to read books for fun, but notably there are about 10% fewer juniors ($n = 36$; 41%) and seniors ($n = 54$; 34%) who disagreed, suggesting that some of the upperclassman love to read but do not

spend much time doing it. As this is the age where many students start working, take on more demanding courses and/or play varsity sports, a lack of recreational time is likely a contributing factor.

Students are not spending many minutes reading outside of school for academic assignments, either. When given a set of time intervals to represent how many minutes they spend reading for all their classes' assignments outside of school, the results were predominantly low, especially for freshmen and seniors.

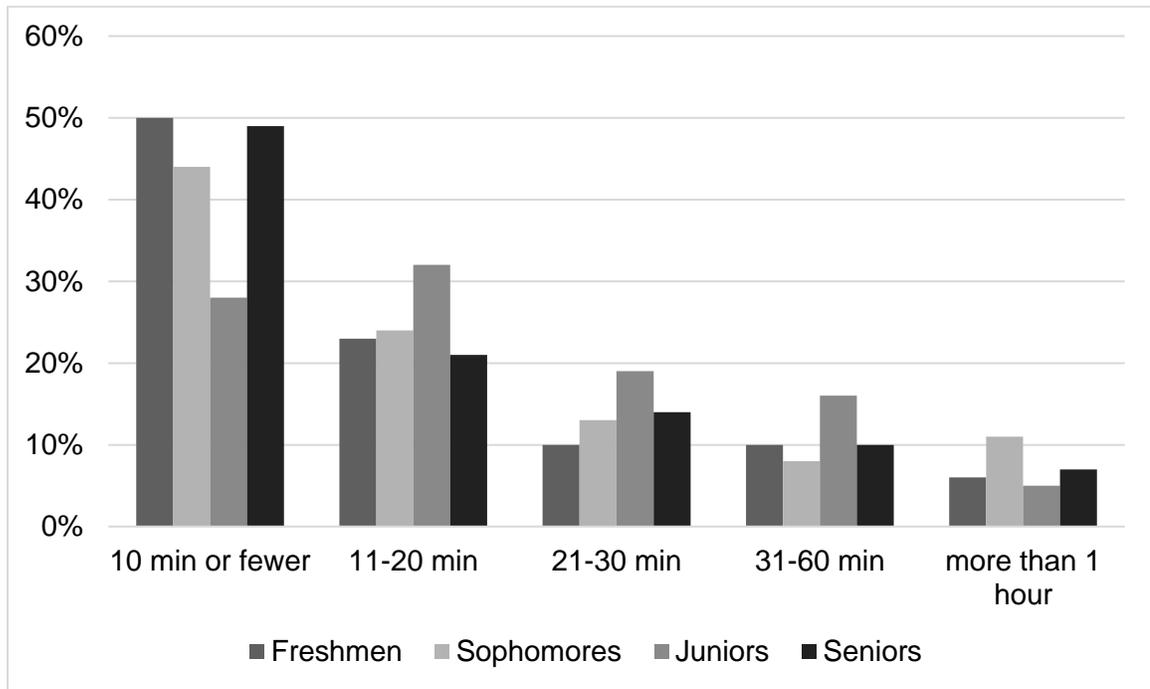


Figure 4. Reading Outside of Class for All Classes by Grade Level

A large number of students who responded ($n = 193$; 44%) estimated that they read for 10 minutes or fewer each day on assignments for all classes combined, with about half of all freshmen and senior respondents reporting that small amount. It is of particular concern how little academic reading seniors are doing, which for many of them is the year right before they begin college. Whether or not reading is being assigned in

greater amounts than the data suggests, the general decline in the number of minutes spent reading for assignments as students age does not bode well for college preparedness.

Questions about parental involvement were included in the survey to examine in comparison to other research findings that indicate parental involvement drops after literacy has been “achieved” in the elementary grades, despite sustained parental involvement having a positive impact on students’ academic and general reading success. This survey revealed that parental involvement in reading is skewed by the child’s sex and declines as students age.

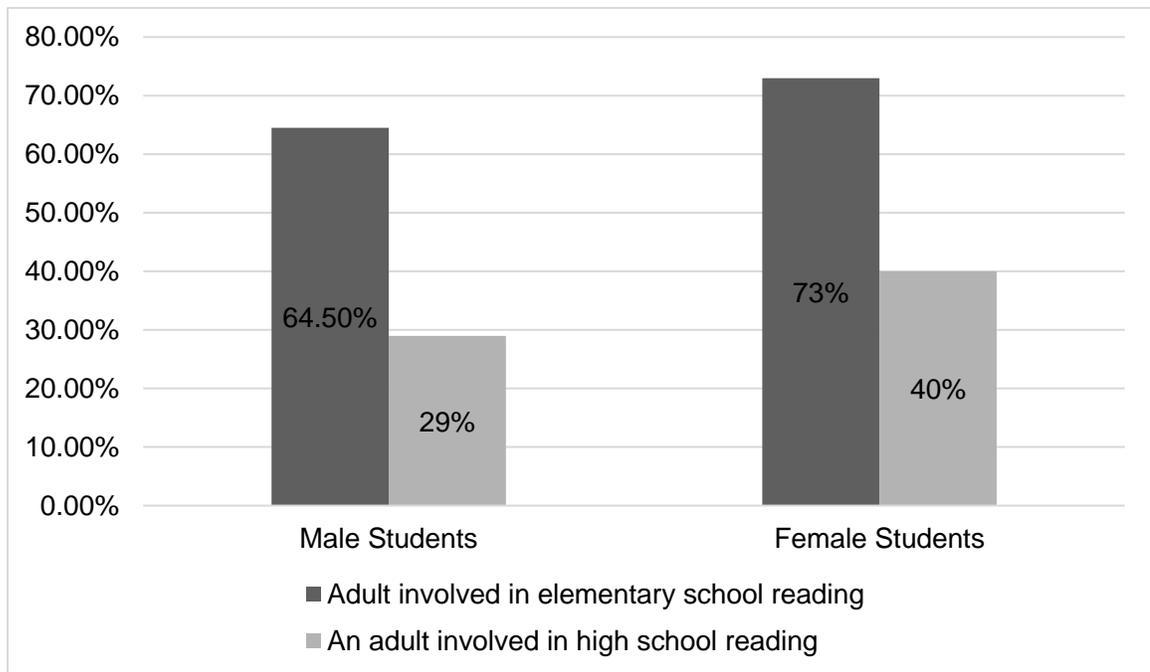


Figure 5. Adult Involvement in Teens’ Reading by Grade Level and Sex

While about two-thirds ($n = 140$; 65%) of male students somewhat or strongly agreed that “an adult read to me, or I read to him or her, in elementary school,” less than one-third ($n = 63$; 29%) felt that an adult was still involved in their reading at the present

time. There was greater reported parental involvement with reading for female students both in elementary school ($n = 159$; 73%) and in high school ($n = 88$; 40%). It is unclear what the causal relationship is between student enjoyment of reading and parental involvement; it is possible that because girls tend to express a love of reading more their parents engage with them about reading, but it is also possible that parents view reading as a feminine activity and do not bring it up with their sons as a result. Additionally, these findings further reinforce the phenomena of parents no longer engaging with their students' reading lives once literacy has been achieved, even though the texts and issues within them grow increasingly more complex as students age.

Students were asked in the survey to identify a career goal and estimate the amounts of reading that would be necessary in both the daily work of the career and in the training for that career. Students largely underestimate the expected amounts of

reading required in both their prospective careers and in the training for those careers.

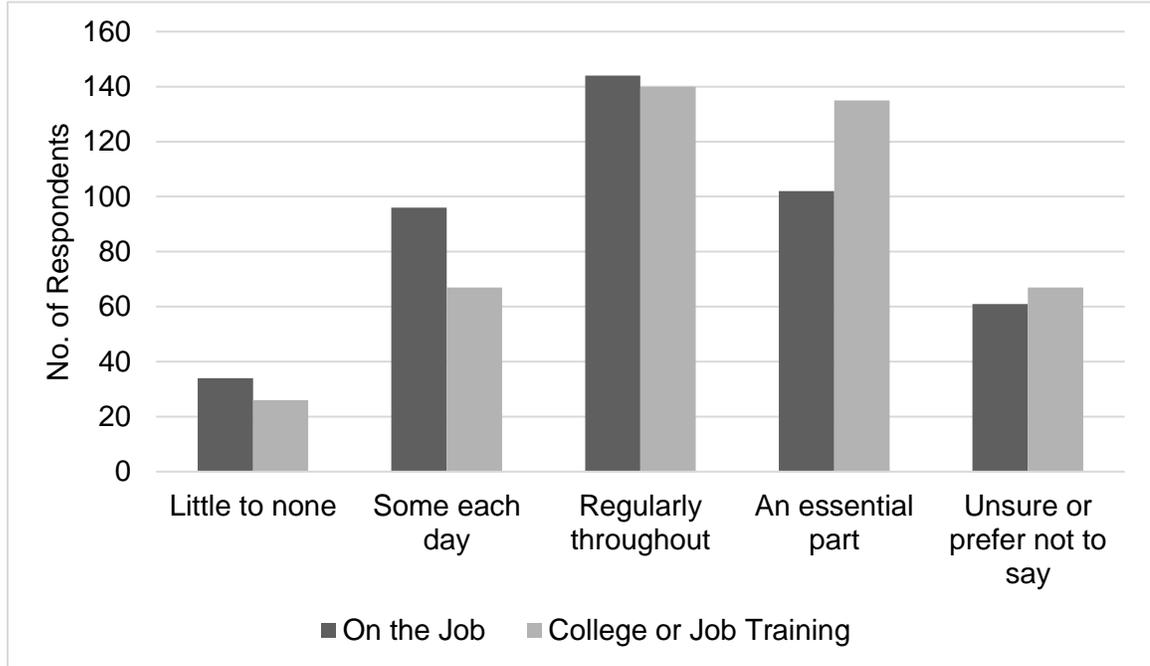


Figure 6. High School Students' Expectations for Reading After High School

A different cross-section of the survey data reveals that nearly equal percentages of freshmen ($n = 13$; 13%) and seniors ($n = 23$; 14%) reported uncertainty in their post-secondary career goals, which is very close to the approximately 14%-15% of students who responded "unsure or prefer not to say" when asked about the expectations of reading for their career or training for their career. Removing that set of students from the data, then, there is still a notable percentage of students who believe that they will not be expected to read regularly on the job ($n = 130$; 30%) or even in college or vocational training programs for that job ($n = 93$; 21%). Correcting these misconceptions should be an essential part of promoting college- and career-readiness among high school students, because students are underestimating the role reading will play in their future.

While most of the survey items were selected-response questions, two open-response questions at the end of the survey allowed students to volunteer more specific information about their reading experiences and advice to their English teachers. Many students elected to leave these blank or wrote “no” or “unsure,” but among students who responded, their needs were made clear: students crave agency when it comes to reading.

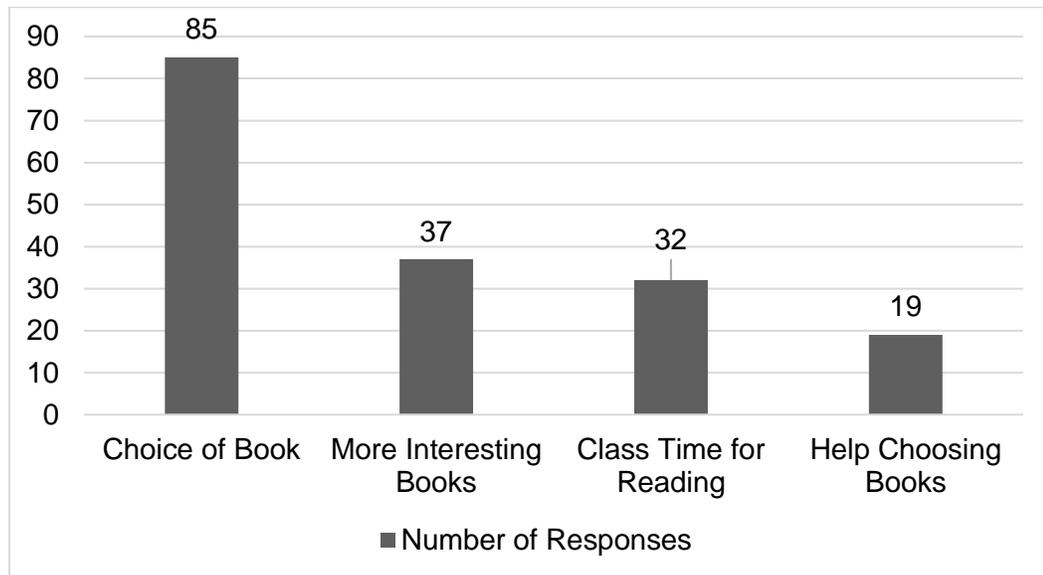


Figure 7. What High School Students Request of Their English Teachers

Students were asked “Is there anything else about your experiences with reading or feelings about reading that you would like to share?” and “What could your English teachers do to help you enjoy reading more or read more in general?” Over a quarter of students surveyed ($n = 122$; 28%) expressed a desire for books that better suited their personal interests, whether that was a more engaging whole-class option or a book they chose themselves. Some students also desired time in class to read ($n = 21$; 7%), with many describing this as time for independently-chosen books and/or as conducted silently and individually. The fourth most prevalent theme in the open responses was a desire for teacher engagement in book selection ($n = 19$; 4%). Many students asked that their

teachers share personal recommendations, preview books with the class, or get to know their students' individual tastes and help match them to books. While the other top responses indicate a desire for agency, this one signals a willingness on the part of students to build a reading community in their English classrooms.

Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the combined survey and interview findings that have significance for high school teachers, other education researchers, and potentially school leaders, such as curriculum directors and building administrators.

Significance for Teachers

All teachers should understand the role student choice plays in their reading instruction, the prevalence of gender divisions in different aspects of reading, and the relationship between reading and college readiness.

Student choice. In both the interviews and the open-ended survey responses, choice of text was the most requested or favored component of reading instruction. For the average classroom teacher, forgoing the whole-class novel is impractical because often those are the only texts available for students to use, or because the teacher feels he or she can better assess student mastery of skills against a book that he or she knows very well. However, the average English teacher also knows how easy it is for students to fake their way through reading a whole-class novel, which ultimately results in next-to-no engagement and little skill building beyond using a search engine. Students reported in this study that they are, in fact, willing to read books that they choose themselves, even if they do not feel that they particularly enjoy reading recreationally. Prominent

advocates of best practices in high school reading would concur that choice matters (Gallagher & Kittle, 2018).

For teachers willing or already providing opportunities for independent reading, another issue for consideration is access to appropriate books. In the school under study there is a well-stocked library with a full-time media specialist, but the students are shut out of this space approximately 9 weeks a year for the gamut of computer-based testing days and not all students in this district meet the residency requirements for a public library card. Many other school districts also face challenges in providing adequate access to books for high school students. If teachers are to allow and require students to read independently-chosen books, they will have to have support in building classroom libraries or otherwise ensuring students have access to books.

Gender divisions. Though reading is essential to a student's academic success both in high school and in post-secondary life, male high school students are not reading as much as their female counterparts. Male students are less likely to identify themselves as readers and have less parental engagement in their reading. Social stigma may still account for some of this divide, as reading is often seen as too sedentary and passive an activity for boys to participate in. Additionally, boys who have been punished for being disruptive during the typically silent and still reading practices in elementary and middle school may have lasting negative associations with this activity into high school.

However, English teachers should not assume that their male students do not want to read or will not enjoy it as much as female students. English teachers can help close the divide by introducing all students to books that interest them through one-on-one conversations, interest surveys, or through class book talks. Boys may benefit from being

introduced to young adult novels with male protagonists, or by inviting male teachers, parents, or school leaders in to give book talks. Just as our schools are currently making efforts to showcase women in STEM fields, we need to show our boys that men read books.

Reading and college readiness. Students underestimate the role that reading will have in college or the training for their career. This should be of concern for many schools, including the one under study, that have missions to prepare all students for college, as well as careers. This study revealed a consistent pattern that students know reading is important and feel like they will be ready for college—indicating that many students will choose to enroll—yet most of them are currently reading very little each day and underestimate the amount of reading that will be expected of them in college. These discrepancies may help explain why so many students, particularly rural students, drop out of college in the first year. Additionally, it's possible that the last two decades of reading instruction in preparation for standardized testing, such as the PSAE in Illinois during the No Child Left Behind era and PARCC as a response to Common Core, have shifted our practices so wholly towards examining smaller passages of text and examining the minutia of literature that we have lost ground in helping students comprehend longer works. (Harman, Boden, Karpenski, & Muchowicz, 2016).

Teachers across grade levels and subject areas may need to emphasize the role of reading in college, and potentially increase their reading assignments for students, either in complexity or length in classes with a college-preparatory designation. In the junior and senior year, students should have exposure to the types of reading assignments expected for college students, such as a supplemental chapter from a college textbook, a

college-level work of literature, or journal article requirements for research writing. High school teachers might also consider asking former students enrolled in their first year of college to visit their classrooms and show students what their syllabi and textbooks look like. Helping secondary school teenagers see themselves in the role of a college student goes beyond passing out free tee-shirts: giving them opportunities to experience (and successfully complete) some college-level reading assignments may help students build the confidence and time-management skills necessary to a successful first year of post-secondary education.

Significance for Researchers

Some of the findings of this study regarding reading and college readiness, a decline in overall reading, and the gender imbalance of reading are congruent with larger-scale research or studies in other regions. Some of the findings in these areas also suggest further research is needed to better understand the causes or scope of some issues with teenage reading habits.

Reading and College Readiness. The findings in this study that students feel ready for college but are reading very little (with a particularly sharp decrease in academic reading in the senior year) is consistent with findings from a study in another high school in the United States where high school seniors feel ready for college but will not read for more than 20 minutes (Hooley, Tysseling & Ray, 2013). Further research is needed to determine how widespread this discrepancy between feeling ready for college but unwilling to read much is, and if there are any direct correlations between students who felt this way in high school and the success of those students in their first year of college.

Decline in Reading. The survey findings that about half of the students under study “rarely” read is consistent with national study findings that about half of high-school age children read a few times a year or less (Rideout, 2014). While the researchers of that study speculated that overscheduled extracurricular activities and the prevalence of electronics were contributing factors, it is unclear if that is consistent for students in all regions and from all different SES backgrounds. Further research in this area may illuminate how schools in different contexts can respond to this dearth of reading. Additionally, further research should be conducted into how teenagers define reading; i.e., do they see reading various forms of media through digital devices as reading in the same sense they would see a physical book? If such a distinction between the two types is a common assumption among teens, then research into the quantity and quality of this digital reading is necessary for a better understanding of literacy among digital natives.

Reading and gender. Consistent with findings from an Australian study, this study found a gender gap in student reading habits with girls tending to report greater levels of reading enjoyment than boys (Merga, 2016). The Australian study also found students with parents who support their reading and model it read more themselves. This study similarly found that boys read less than girls, but also had less parental reading involvement than girls do, which may be a contributing factor. More research is needed into what causes boys to read less than girls, and whether those differences have impacts on test scores, college completion or other post-secondary metrics.

The academic impacts of self-selected independent reading. Other research has concluded that choice and time are important factors of what students need to better

develop reading (Merga, 2016), which was consistent with the findings of this study, wherein students overwhelmingly identified having a say in the books they read as their main request for English teachers. However, more research is needed to study the correlations between structured independent reading and metrics of success, such as test scores, high school graduation and college completion. Additionally, there is continued debate among teachers about whether independent reading should require students only to read books at a certain grade level or let them read below grade level. While there is research on the impact of this in the elementary and middle school grades, more research is needed on this at the high school level.

Significance for School Leaders

Many school districts mandate common curriculum and assessments across classes that make it difficult for teachers to implement changes without the permission and support of building and district administrators, curriculum directors, and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). School leaders can take an active role in building a community of readers and promoting college-readiness in reading throughout their high schools.

A community of readers. English teachers must be allowed to build independent reading time into their curriculum. There are a number of ways independent reading can be assessed and aligned closely to any literature standards the district uses. Supporting teachers in professional development for assessing independent reading may be as simple as giving them time to meet and develop their own assessments or by helping them access best practices through professional journals.

While independent reading is essential, the key factor is students' choosing their own texts. This requires that all students have access to a large number of high-interest books. Schools without libraries or media specialists must emphasize the importance of classroom libraries to their school boards and provide necessary funds to help teachers acquire texts appropriate to their students, reflecting a diversity of perspectives, topics and authors. Schools with libraries must be sure to keep them stocked and the doors open to students as much as possible.

School leaders can also promote reading by encouraging the visibility of readers and books in the school setting. Some schools have signs outside the classroom doors where teachers update what book they're currently reading. Others decorate the halls with book recommendations; prominently display new library books; include student book reviews in the school newspaper, announcements, or website; or provide resources for after-school book clubs. Some administrators pop into classrooms during reading time and read alongside students or ask them about their books. There are countless creative options for school leaders to promote reading and celebrate readers.

College-ready readers. If school districts have a mission to prepare student for college, schools must be more transparent with students about the reading expectations at that level. School principals, directors of curriculum or PLCs must identify which classes might be college-preparatory in name but less so in reading practices and reconfigure curriculum to better prepare students for the level and amount of reading in a college course for that subject. This is not to say that all high school classes should have college-level and amounts of reading, but there should be a clear scaling up of each freshmen through senior year. School districts that have partnerships with local or community

colleges might ask for access to examples of textbooks and journal articles for teachers to use with their students, or invite instructors of remedial reading courses in to curriculum meetings to discuss where to fill in the gaps before college.

Family engagement. Given the clear decline in parental reading engagement in the high school years, school leaders may consider sharing information with parents and guardians about the importance of continuing to be involved in a student's reading life. Schools could host new events to engage families in the school libraries, or share the importance of reading and model ways a parent can get involved in a teenager's reading at open house events.

Limitations

There are some possible limitations from this study regarding the data pool, population, and data reliability. The data pool in this study was relatively limited, with only one school participating and less than half the students within that school participating in the survey. Additionally, the students in this school are relatively homogenous, making it difficult to generalize the results of the study to a larger population. Additionally, teenagers may complete self-assessment-type questions without much introspection, or may perceive themselves very differently from one time of the school year to the next. Factors such as having their teacher hovering nearby, other students looking (or potentially able to look) at their screen, or the knowledge that their own teacher was the researcher reading and collecting the data may have impacted their answers in the survey. Additionally, one quarter of the students who participated in the survey were responding to questions about reading directly to their current English

teacher, which may have impacted the accuracy of their responses. Additionally, there was no second rater to proof the determinations of this study.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

- A. Grade level
- B. Sex
- C. Race/ethnicity
- D. Is English the language you typically speak at home with your family?
- E. Do you have an IEP or 504 plan?
- F. Have you ever failed a semester of an English class in high school?
- G. What grade did you get in your primary English class (the one that you are taking for the first time) last semester?
- H. Choose the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of these statements:
 - 1. I love to read books for fun
 - 2. I rarely read books except when I have to for school assignments
 - 3. I think reading is boring.
 - 4. I like to read books to escape from stress or problems.
 - 5. I would rather someone just tell me information so I don't have to read to get it.
 - 6. I used to enjoy reading books in elementary or middle school, but I don't anymore.
 - 7. I would like to read more for fun, but I don't have enough time for that.
- I. If you would like to read more fun but don't feel you have the time, which of the following prevents you from doing so? (check all that apply).
- J. How often do you read news articles, websites, blog posts or other print items (besides social media) on your electronic device for fun?
- K. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
 - 1. An adult in my home read to me (or I read to them) regularly in elementary school or earlier.
 - 2. I see an adult in my home reading (either print or digital) books, newspapers, or magazines often.

3. I feel that at least one adult in my home is involved with my reading this year.
- L. What career would you like to have as an adult?
 - M. How much reading do you think you will do on this job?
 - N. What kind of training will you need for this career?
 - O. How much reading do you think will be required in the training for this career?
 - P. In your ENGLISH class this year, how much in-class reading do you feel you do, on average, each day?
 - Q. How important is it to complete a reading assignment for English class (example: an assigned chapter of a novel) compared to other (written) homework?
 - R. How frequently do you use Sparknotes or other online resources INSTEAD of reading?
 - S. For ALL your classes this year, how much reading OUTSIDE of class are you doing each day?
 - T. In your opinion, how important is it that a student enjoys reading?
 - U. Is there anything else about your experiences with reading or feelings about reading that you would like to share?
 - V. What could your English teachers do to help you enjoy reading more or read more in general?
 - W. Would you be willing to participate in a short interview about your reading experiences during advisory? You will be compensated with an Amazon gift card. Enter your first and last name as it appears in Skyward to be considered for the interview.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- A. What were your reading experiences like in middle school?
- B. Do you feel like you read more, less, or the same as you did in middle school? Why?
- C. How frequently do you think your friends read?
- D. How often do you talk about books with your friends?
- E. Would a friend make fun of you for reading, or would you make fun of a friend for reading? Why?
- F. When you are assigned to read outside of class, how likely are you to read the entire assigned text?
- G. Are you more, less, or as likely to read in a book club or independent reading unit than you are a whole-class novel?
- H. What could an English teacher do to help you read more or enjoy reading more?
- I. How important do you think being a reader is for college and future employment?
- J. What kind of reading do you think you will most likely have to do for college classes?
- K. How many pages a week do you think you will have to read in college? Do you feel you will be prepared to read that amount by the time you are old enough for college?