

“I Hate to Read—Or Do I?”: Low Achievers and Their Reading

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This study is phase two of the Barnstable Study of a Web-based high school summer reading program that replaced traditional summer reading lists. It focuses on low-achieving students who had a low participation rate in the first two years of the program. The researchers interviewed and surveyed seventy students who formed seven focus groups. This study challenges assumptions about struggling readers. Do struggling readers consider themselves readers outside of school where they have choices that relate to what they like to do? Do they read? What do they read? Do they really hate to read? Gender and grade level emerged as factors in participation rates in the program. Student responses emphasized the importance of relevance of reading materials to their reading preferences. Low achievers had a strong preference for alternative reading materials, which has implications for the way schools structure reading for adolescents who are struggling readers.

Introduction

Who are the adolescents who say they hate to read? This study looks at the reading behaviors of low achievers to determine whether they actually read on their own and, if so, what they read. It addresses the everyday reading interests and habits of adolescents outside of school as well as their school-related reading. Summer reading bridges these reading environments, offering opportunities to study both.

This study challenges assumptions and research findings that profile low achievers as nonreaders. It poses questions about low achievers and their reading outside of school curricula. The research took place in the context of a summer reading program that was redesigned for a digital (rather than traditional) print environment. Traditional summer reading—defined as a mandated reading activity that offers a choice of reading materials limited to books organized by grade level and often requires students to present evidence of their reading in the form of written summaries or reports—is under researched. Although there are many studies that acknowledge the importance of reading during the summer, there is no research that investigates the effects of a Web-based summer reading program on low-achieving students. This study is a follow-up to an initial study of the effect of a Web-based summer reading program on the attitudes and reading behaviors of high school students (Lu and Gordon 2007). The high nonparticipatory rate of low achievers and the negative remarks about reading in survey responses in that study raise questions that focus this follow-up study: What are the attitudes and behaviors of low-achieving students toward reading when given free choice? Do low achievers consider themselves readers

outside of school, where they have choices that relate to what they like to do? What do they read? Do they really hate to read?

What the Research Says

The literature describes low achievers as young people who have low intelligence and low reading levels (Hoskyn and Swanson 2000, 102). They lack the defining attributes of the struggling reader—poor reading comprehension, study skills, word recognition, and reading fluency (Vacca and Vacca 1999)—and present an unmotivated, disinterested attitude toward school and school work. Students who say they hate to read are not likely to believe or have confidence that they can read (Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez 1998). Students who have low self-efficacy (belief that one can succeed) regarding reading believe that they cannot read even if they work hard (Zimmerman 2000). Struggling readers resist reading or are apathetic about it (McCabe and Margolis 2001).

It is tempting to reach the conclusion (as some researchers have) that the struggling reader “is disengaged from literacy” (Moje et al. 2000). The data shows, however, that all adolescents are reading less. There is “a downward trend in voluntary reading by youth at the middle and high school levels over the past two decades” (Alverman et al., 2007, 34) that clearly signals that something other than reading for fun is occupying their time. That “something” may be emerging literacies based in digital technologies. “What counts as literacy—and how literacy is practiced—are now in historical transition, and young people . . . are at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms” (Hull and Zacker 2004, 42). “How do youth who are underachievers and who struggle when reading school-assigned textbooks engage with popular culture of their own choosing (e.g., magazines, comics, TV, video games, music, CDs, graffiti, e-mail, and other Internet-mediated texts)?” (Alverman et al. 2007, 36). There is little in the literature about the personal and everyday literacies of adolescents (Alverman, Fitzgerald, and Simpson 2006), but much attention is given to the potential of these literacies for engaging adolescents with reading (Alverman, Huddleston, and Hagood 2004; Moje et al. 2000).

A report from the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) expands the investigation of reading trends from exclusively focusing on literary reading to include a variety of reading, including fiction and nonfiction genres published as books, magazines, newspapers, and online reading. Despite the inclusion of nontraditional reading formats, the report cites a downward trend in reading among secondary-school-age students since 1992: Less than one-third of thirteen-year-olds are daily readers, and fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds spend only seven to ten minutes per day on voluntary reading, which is about 60 percent less time than the average American (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2006). The percentage of seventeen-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a twenty-year period (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2004). The report notes that the percentage of thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds who say they read for fun almost every day was lower in 2004 than in 1984 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2004). There is also an increase over the same period of time in the percentage of people who say they never or hardly ever read for fun. For all three age groups, “reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement” (National Endowment for the Arts 2007, 12). There is consensus in the literature that students who say they read for pleasure on a daily or weekly basis score better on reading and writing tests than infrequent readers (National Endowment for the Arts 2007), but there are contradictions in the literature about whether reading for pleasure is actually declining. McQuillan (1998) challenges the validity of a “literacy

crisis.” The data from the Scholastic study (2008) show that about two-thirds of responding youth reported that they read at least two to three days per week. In an international study of youth, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports the reading habits of fifteen-year-olds in thirty-two countries: 72 percent of students say they read for enjoyment on a regular basis. Only 12 percent read an average of more than one hour a day, but 23 percent read between thirty minutes and one hour, and 36 percent read up to thirty minutes (OECD 2002). In a review of the literature, Clark and Rumbold (2006, 9) note, “Although reading for pleasure has also not been a research priority, studies are accumulating that emphasize the importance of reading for pleasure for both educational as well as personal development.” The review also notes that a handful of studies explore the question of why people read.

The question of what young people read, on the other hand, has been the subject of many studies. “However, there still is no definitive understanding of what children prefer to read and when these preferences develop. Research findings are also likely to present only a temporal snapshot of children’s and young people’s reading preferences” (Clark and Rumbold 2006, 15). Studies consistently report that young people choose to read diverse materials such as magazines, websites, text messages, jokes, and books or magazines about TV programs (Clark and Foster 2005).

The question of reading for pleasure among struggling readers is central to this study. There is abundant evidence that reading for pleasure, or Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), reaps benefits for the reader that equal or exceed direct instruction in reading remediation. A meta-analysis compares studies of in-school free reading with traditional, direct instruction approaches to reading remediation. “In 51 out of 54 studies, students using FVR did as well or better on reading tests than students given traditional skill-based reading instruction” (Krashen 2004, 2–3). Several studies focus on FVR and low achievers. McNeil, quoted in Fader (1976), examined the effects of a free reading program on sixty reform school boys, ages twelve to seventeen, who were encouraged to read newspapers, magazines, and paperback books. Reading was followed by class discussion. After one year, the boys’ reading comprehension scores increased from 69.9 to 82.7, or 12.8 points, while the comparison group made a gain of 4.6 points. Shinn (1998) examines the effect of a six-week, self-selected reading experience among two hundred sixth-grade low achievers who attended summer school because of low reading proficiency. About 30 percent of each group were limited in their English proficiency as well. Of the four hours per day of classes, two hours were devoted to self-selected reading, including twenty-five minutes in the school library. In addition, about forty-five minutes per day was spent reading young adult novels. The comparison group followed a standard language arts curriculum. The readers gained approximately five months on the Altos test of reading comprehension and vocabulary over the six weeks, while the comparison groups’ comprehension declined. On the Nelson-Denny reading comprehension test, the summer readers raised their comprehension scores by a whole year or more. Studies also show a relationship between amounts read and spelling performance (Stanovich and West 1989; Polak and Krashen 1998) and a positive relationship between reading and writing ability (Lee and Krashen 1997; Lee 2001).

In this study, summer reading is considered extended reading—a type of FVR. Despite the research evidence on the positive effects of FVR, summer reading is becoming increasingly structured in schools. What would happen if the invitation to read during the summer months migrated from static, printed reading lists to a digital environment? How would more choice, presented in a highly graphic, Web-based site, affect the reading behaviors of low achievers?

Background to the Study

Reading Takes You Places was a Web-based summer reading program that took place in an American high school during the summer of 2006 and was the subject of phase one (Lu and Gordon 2007) of a two-phase study. The program replaced the typical approach to summer reading: graded reading lists with a limited number of titles that favored the classics (Williams 2002). However, in the process of revising summer reading, two conflicting ideas held by the English teachers emerged from discussion: (1) the view that summer reading is an extension of the curriculum and should contain “good literature,” and (2) the view that summer reading is an opportunity for pleasure reading that contains high-interest, motivating reading materials. The library media specialist mediated this discussion and the teachers agreed to build the program on the basis of evidence from reading research. The plan consisted of creating a website that included expanded reading lists, graphics, and diverse activities or projects. The following research findings informed the design of this summer reading program and continues to inform revision of the website.

1. Free choice and FVR motivate readers to read more (Krashen 2004). Since people who say they read more read better (Krashen 2004), the primary purpose of the program was to encourage students to read more.
2. The program offered students choice because choice is an important element in reading engagement (Schraw, Flowerday, and Reisetter 1998). This includes the choice to pursue personal reading interests. To this end, the school librarian administered a survey to students to collect their recommendations for book titles. Staff recommendations are collected through e-mail.
3. Student projects accommodate multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993) and thinking styles (Sternberg 1997) as well as options for written work.
4. Because “results suggest that schools can encourage children to read more by also requiring them to complete a short writing activity based on their summer reading activities” and that “students who fulfilled teacher requirements by writing about their summer book . . . are predicted to read more books than their classmates who did not complete these activities,” (Kim 2004, 185) reading responses included writing activities.
5. Reading-response projects reflecting activities students enjoy in their leisure time are grounded in reading response described as the aesthetic stance in transactional theory (Rosenblatt 1978).
6. The summer reading program is Web-based because “virtually all Net Gen students were using computers by the time they were 16 to 18 years of age. . . . Among children ages 8 to 18, 96 percent have gone online. Seventy-four percent have access at home, and 61 percent use the Internet on a typical day” (Jones 2002).
7. In a study that altered text instructions in an assignment to a graphic layout, there were fewer refusals to do the assignment, and posttest score increased (Prensky 2001). Because the Internet generation is not only attracted to image-rich environments but is more comfortable with them, the website is visually attractive with many colorful graphics.
8. To encourage students to read more, the primary purpose of summer reading is reading for fun rather than for academic purposes.

The researchers investigated how well this Web-based summer reading program worked. Findings were similar to study conducted in Nova Scotia (Howard and Jin 2007). Teens read an average of 3.26 books during the summer, girls read more than boys, and teens rely on public libraries and bookstores to obtain their reading (Lu and Gordon 2007). In addition, this summer reading study revealed that low achievers had a greater nonparticipatory rate in the summer

reading program than other average and honor students who had a high participation rate as indicated by the poor response to the survey (Lu and Gordon 2007). When low-achieving students did respond, they reported negative references to reading. The researchers returned to the research site again after the second administration of the Web-based summer reading program in the summer of 2007 to study low achievers' reading interests, attitudes, and behaviors. The data was related to the second year of the summer reading program, renamed [Flop Down and Flip the Pages](#), which took place the following year. There are thirteen book lists; some are genre-centered but modified for broader appeal. For example, science fiction includes time travel and fantasy. Each title recommended by a student or staff member is tagged with a "thumbs up" icon. Because the school has a Brazilian population of students whose first language is Portuguese, titles by Brazilian authors are included in as many lists as possible to encourage these students to read in Portuguese as well as English, since primary language plays a significant role in the intellectual growth of bi- and multilingual children (Cummins 1981).

The reading lists are designed to mimic commercial webpages, such as Amazon.com, with an annotated featured title and image at the top of each page. A link to NoveList (an electronic database that contains titles of fiction books, abstracts, and recommendations for further reading) directs students to find "more books like this one." Another feature, "Get Books," leads students to links to the catalogs of the school library and the regional public library collaborative network. There are also links to Borders and Barnes and Noble's websites where students can purchase books.

The last section of the website is called "Reading Responses." Students choose activities from fifteen Novel Ideas that mimic what they like to do in their daily lives, such as talking on the phone and surfing the Web. Other choices include blogging, an exercise called "How to Judge a Book by its Cover," and joining summer reading programs the students are considering.

The Phase-Two Study of Low Achievers' Reading

The following year, the researchers returned to the high school to follow up on findings about low achievers and summer reading. In this school, students are tracked using reading scores from eighth grade when they enter ninth grade. Each year, students are reevaluated on the basis of their academic grades to determine whether they remain in the low-achieving track or move to the average performing track. Since placement in English classes by ability ensures that all students in the low-achieving track are homogeneously grouped, the unit of selection of the sample is the English class, grades nine through twelve. Each class became a focus group for participation in discussion of their reading and a survey.

Demographics of the Sample

The sample consisted of seventy low-achieving students from grades nine through twelve. Seven low-achieving English classes were randomly selected. Of the seventy low-achieving participants, thirty-seven were male and thirty-three were female. There were twenty-five ninth-grade students, twenty tenth-grade students, twenty-two eleventh-grade students, and three twelfth-grade students. Forty-one percent of students (twenty-nine out of seventy) reported they participate in the school summer reading program. Participants by grade level were eight from ninth grade, seven from tenth grade, twelve from eleventh grade, and two from twelfth grade. There were nineteen female students and ten male students. Female students had a higher participation rate than male students (58 percent to 27 percent). Also, twelfth- and eleventh-

grade students had a comparatively higher participation rate (66 percent and 55 percent) than tenth- and ninth-grade respondents (35 percent and 32 percent, respectively).

Data Collection

The sample was composed of seven homogeneous focus groups consisting of seventy low-achieving students from grades nine through twelve who participated in the summer reading program during the summer of 2007. Since the classes contained an average of ten students, each class functioned as a focus group. In their interactions with the researchers, students explored their views and attitudes about reading. Each student responded to a survey following the focus group discussions, which were fifteen to twenty minutes in length. Close-ended questions gathered information such as age, gender, and grade level. Half of the questions were open ended to encourage students' direct and honest response about their reading behaviors and attitudes. Survey items focused on respondents' summer reading behaviors and reading achievements as well as their reading experiences with alternative media, such as newspapers, magazines, and websites.

Findings and Discussion

Participation in the Web-Based Summer Reading Program

Of the seventy low-achieving students in the sample, 59 percent did not participate in the summer reading program. Most nonparticipants said that they did not like reading and that they did not read. No participants complained about computer and Internet access, so lack of access to computers and the Internet was not perceived as a major barrier to participating in this Web-based reading program. Lower participation among low-achieving male students than females (72 percent to 42 percent) is consistent with studies that acknowledge the significance of gender in reading activities. However, contrary to previous research findings, this study found that the higher the grade level, the better the participation. This may have been because some eighth-grade respondents were not aware of their new high school's summer reading program when they transitioned from the district's middle schools—although, as outgoing eighth-grade students, they did receive information about the Web-based summer reading program. Also, there were only two twelve-grade, low-achieving students in this study compared with more than twenty students from each of other grade levels. However, this trend was consistent across the four grades.

Number of Books Read

Students were asked to read three books during the summer and complete a project for each book in the fall. A total of fifty-seven books were reported read by twenty-seven low-achieving students, with two other students reporting "reading a lot." This was 41 percent of the sample. The mean number of books read was 2.1 books per participating student, which was nearly a book more than the mean measured the previous year in the same school (Lu and Gordon 2007). Unlike the previous year, there was not a significant gender difference in the number of books read. On average, female students read only slightly more than males (2.2 books to 1.8 books). Nor was grade level significant to the number of books read. The numbers across the four grades was 1.8, 2.6, 2.1, and 2.0 books.

Reading Interests

Two variables were used to examine students' reading interests: their self-reported interests and their reported reading behaviors, including the book lists students chose to browse on the

summer reading website. Initially, students in all the focus groups expressed negative feelings about reading and most said that they did not read. More boys than girls said they hate to read. As the discussion progressed, however, they became animated about books they had read in English class with teachers they liked and respected. They then became animated when talking about the books they liked to read on their own. They emphasized the importance of “being able to relate to” what they read. Low achievers liked “something true and exciting,” “things about real people,” “stories about current modern teenager life,” and books “about everyday life,” to name a few. They liked books about characters involved in struggles with drug and other addictions, abuse, and dysfunctional families. They consistently identified *A Child Called It* and *Go Ask Alice* as their favorite books. Low achievers grasped the emotional and psychological benefits of reading; they valued reading as a cathartic, healing experience. They clearly understood that reading is a personal experience that involves their emotions and needs as well as their minds. It was as though they were aware of reading-response theory and transactional analysis as they sought to resolve their own issues through characters with whom they could identify and empathize.

They clearly did not like “things that are not real [referring to fantasy and science fiction],” “books that drag on [referring to length],” and “books that are too wordy [referring to long descriptions].” Not surprisingly, these low-achieving students did not like Harry Potter, a high-interest series among most teens that had each of the elements they considered negative. Only four of the teens had read one or two books of the Harry Potter series. None read more than three books in the series. There was strong consensus within the focus groups that they did not like fantasy or science fiction. Another high-interest genre among teenagers, manga and comic books, was not popular with these low-achieving students either. Only one of them had read manga or comic books. Many of them were not familiar with the word “manga.”

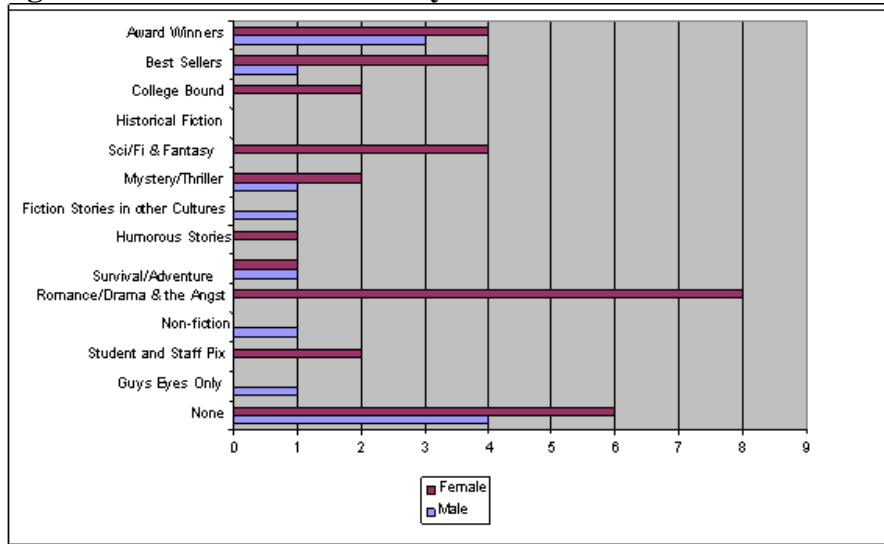
The survey findings were consistent with the results of the focus group discussions. Regarding the books they read in the summer, respondents reported forty-four titles used for reading projects. Six of the titles were not included in this analysis because of illegible handwriting, incomplete or incorrect titles, or respondents’ inability to recall titles. Thirty-eight books were then classified into three categories: realistic fiction (70.5 percent), fantasy and science fiction (16 percent), and nonfiction, including autobiography and biography titles (13.5 percent). The significant difference between realistic fiction and the other categories is not surprising considering low-achieving students’ preference for real-life characters and themes. Even the nonfiction books they read (e.g., *A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer, its sequel *The Lost Boy*, and *Juiced* by Jose Canseco) had similar humane characteristics and strong narratives.

The students’ reading interests were reflected by the book lists they chose to browse. The summer reading program provided thirteen book lists for the students. Among the twenty-nine low achievers who participated, 66 percent browsed the lists. The top three lists browsed most frequently were *The Romance*, *the Drama and the Angst* (which contains popular titles about romance, love, and relationships), *Award and Honor Winners* (which offers a variety of young adult award-winning titles by popular authors), and *Run with a Winner: Best Sellers* (which includes titles from bestseller lists of contemporary, realistic novels from the *New York Times* bestseller lists).

Were there any gender differences in terms of reading preferences and interests? Results of this study do reveal some differences, but the sample size—only twenty-nine summer reading

participants—was too small for statistical analysis. There are, however, some interesting gender-related findings worthy of further observation (see figure 1). For example, the most popular list, *The Romance, the Drama and the Angst*, was browsed exclusively by females. In contrast, the list dedicated solely to boys, *Guys Eyes Only* (which was added because of the lower participation rate of boys in the previous year’s summer reading program), was visited by only one male low-achieving student. Male students did not show a penchant for any specific categories. Since only one boy browsed the *Guys Eyes Only* list, it is difficult to gauge their attitude toward this category. Perhaps they did not have interest in this specific category, or they did not see this list because they would have to scroll to the bottom of the webpage to find it. Perhaps they chose not to browse because, as one male student commented, “I know what I want to read.”

Figure 1: Book Lists Browsed by Gender



The most important factors affecting participants’ book selection were illustration and cover (28 percent), subject (21 percent), length (21 percent), and recommendation by a friend (21 percent). Random selection was reported by 21 percent of respondents.

Alternative Reading

One question posed to all low-achieving participants and nonparticipants of summer reading was whether they read any of the following materials during the past summer: a newspaper article, a magazine, a website or anything on the Internet, sports news, or a comic or manga book. The purpose of this question was to explore whether low-achieving students read alternative media. Low achievers reported that they read newspaper articles (60 percent), magazines (60 percent), websites (71 percent), sports news (34 percent), and comic and manga books (11 percent). Only 10 percent of the seventy low-achieving students reported that they did not read materials in any of these formats. Thus these low-achieving students, who said they hated to read, were actually engaged in reading media other than books.

In a comparative analysis of alternative reading between summer reading participants and nonparticipants, the only major difference (19 percent) emerged in comparing newspaper reading between participants and nonparticipants (see table 1). The cause of this difference is unclear.

Table 1. Alternative Reading by Summer Reading Participants and Nonparticipants

	Participant (n=29)		Nonparticipant (n=41)	
Newspaper Article	20	69%	21	51%
Magazine	19	66%	23	56%
Website	21	72%	29	70%
Sports News	12	41%	13	32%
Comic/Manga	3	10%	5	12%

Two categories yielded substantial gender differences: magazine and sports news (see table 2). The biggest gender difference in alternative reading appeared in the category of sports news. While twenty-one male students (57 percent) read sports news, only four female students (12 percent) did so. The popularity of sports news among boys indicates that this is probably a category or subject that is comparable to romance/drama/angst for girls. Thus, while the needs and interests of girls are met by summer reading lists, those of boys are not. This explains why the addition of the *For Guys Eyes Only* reading list of nonfiction books in the second year failed to attract male students.

Table 2. Alternative Reading by Gender

	Male (n=37)		Female (n=33)	
Newspaper Article	20	54%	21	64%
Magazine	18	49%	24	73%
Website	24	65%	26	79%
Sports News	21	57%	4	12%
Comic/Manga	4	11%	4	12%

The second biggest difference came from magazine reading: 49 percent of boys read magazines compared with 73 percent of girls. Since we can expect that girls will read more than boys, it is useful to also look at the data about the preferences among boys that indicates that low-achieving boys who do read prefer reading on websites (65 percent), sports news (57 percent), and other newspaper articles (54 percent).

Benefits of Reading

Students reported a variety of rewarding benefits from reading, ranging from technical components (such as grammar) to content (such as “information about other people”) to psychological and social components (such as “dealing with discrimination”). It is noticeable that among all the reading benefits these students mentioned, a majority of them were associated with dealing with personal challenges such as “depression,” “friendship issues,” or “relationship problems.” Only three students mentioned “knowledge,” “sports news,” and “information about other people.” Two students pointed out “vocabulary” and “grammar” as their reading benefits. The overwhelming importance of learning life lessons identified by the students is not surprising given that this group of students showed a strong preference for contemporary realistic fiction, which typically addresses a variety of social issues.

Implications for Practice and Further Study

Emerging from these findings is a snapshot of low-achieving students' reading interests, reading behaviors, and perceptions of the benefits associated with reading. The findings reveal that low achievers favor stories that have a realistic and human touch. For many of them, such stories seem to function as a tool for developing or even influencing individual behavior and personality, as evinced by their testimonies in the previous section that describe their perceptions of the benefits derived from reading. Low achievers seem to acknowledge that realistic stories and believable characters contribute to their personal growth by helping them tackle life's challenges. This finding is in agreement with current adolescent information behavior models that theorize about teens who seek information to facilitate their developmental needs (Agosto and Hughes-Hassel 2006). This is also consistent with contemporary folklore research suggesting that stories play a significant role in "stimulating the intellectual, spiritual, and psychological development of human beings" (King 1992, 1). This finding points to differentiation in service provision that provides materials and structures that help students grow not only cognitively but psychologically, emotionally, and socially through their reading experiences. The benefits of reading may be more critical to the well-being of low-achieving students than is obvious, especially when they tell us how much they hate reading. These findings indicate that the needs of low achievers are specialized; these needs are different from the needs and interests of other students.

The selection of reading materials and evaluation of the benefits of reading in schools rarely looks at social and psychological effects of reading, especially for low-achieving and struggling readers.

The findings of this study also address the appropriate measurement of reading outcomes, which has been driven by quantity for decades. The measures used are the number of books students read and standardized test scores to evaluate how well students read. However, books are not the only reading medium, and standardized reading tests cannot measure the private and personal learning experiences identified by low-achieving students. Reading offers low achievers life lessons and new insights into personal challenges. Although evaluation of these personal aspects can be difficult and subjective, individuals do benefit from reading in various ways. There is a need for more differentiation in reading-outcome measurement, including the need for not only the use of standardized reading tests but also qualitative forms of assessment that include the emotional, psychological, and social benefits of reading that reflect a more humane and realistic definition of reading literacy.

The importance of including alternative reading materials is indicated by the findings of this study. When alternatives to books are excluded from summer reading programs, low-achieving students get the message that reading books is more important than reading other formats. The exclusion of alternative media obstructs efforts to get low achievers to read more and therefore to read better (Krashen 2004), and it contradicts claims that summer reading is predicated on free choice, which the research tells us promotes reading (Krashen 2004). The exclusion of alternative media in summer reading programs sends the message that when low achievers are reading alternative materials, they are not really reading, which discounts and undervalues their reading experiences. The new learning standards of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) address the role of engagement and personal interests in reading by encouraging twenty-first-century learners to select "resources that are engaging and appropriate for personal interests and needs" (AASL 2007).

Recognition of alternative media as legitimate reading raises the question of the meaning of literacy. The “Common Beliefs” of AASL’s (2007) *Learning Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* incorporates multiple literacies in a definition of information literacy that has become more complex. One of the most important international definitions of reading literacy comes from PISA’s survey administered by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, which surveyed 265,000 students from thirty-two countries. Their results found that reading literacy is no longer considered to be simply the ability to read and write. Today, “reading literacy is understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD 2003, 108). It is significant that low-achieving students do not discriminate against alternative reading materials but see them as meeting their needs to develop and grow. While most of them saw book reading as “boring,” a “waste of time,” “too wordy,” and “a headache,” some enthusiastically engaged with reading other formats, such as newspaper articles, magazines, and websites. A broad definition of literacy echoes findings about the reading behaviors of low-achieving students in dealing with life lessons through reading. Low achievers are well aware of their need to live vicariously through story. As we develop a perspective on reading that goes beyond standardized tests, a new theoretical framework to encompass different reading competencies appears to be needed. An improved pedagogy addresses the affective dimension of reading as well as reading for comprehension that acknowledges that reading is pleasurable. Rigidity about what students should read, compounded by an institutional insistence on accountability for voluntary reading, creates barriers to reading for struggling readers. The problem of low reading scores may be one of aliteracy rather than illiteracy. Is a monolithic, institutionalized approach to FVR in schools discouraging low-achieving adolescents from reading? Reports and projects send the message that reading is an institutionalized rather than a personal experience, and that even during the summer students must be accountable for what they read and how much they read. Regimentation of reading tells low achievers that they cannot be trusted to read. However, we know that many of the low achievers in this study do read during the summer, and, in so doing, they acknowledge that reading is pleasurable and worthwhile. When they say they hate to read, are they really saying that they hate to read what we ask them to read?

The findings of the study raise questions about the forty-one silent, hardcore nonreaders who did not participate in the summer reading program. They clearly have different needs from the twenty-nine low achievers who did participate and do read. The implication of the findings is that there is a need to recognize that not all low-achieving students are struggling readers or nonreaders, and that low achievers have diverse needs. Nonreading low achievers really do hate to read because they struggle to read. These students, unlike their participating counterparts, cannot seem to find reading materials that are below their levels of frustration. They do not need a summer reading program that asks them to read on or above their frustration levels and then abandons them. Low-achieving students need access to diverse reading materials and support during the summer months that includes reading guidance to help them find home-run reading materials that are both developmentally appropriate and below their levels of frustration. They need adult guidance and peer interaction to encourage them to read. Their refusal to read is a refusal to endure more frustration, isolation, and failure. The findings point to more differentiation in accessible reading materials and services that address these differences as well as differentiated approaches that distinguish between low achievers who read and those who do not or cannot. Assuming that low achievers are nonreaders seems to be a self-fulfilling prophecy when summer reading is interpreted as an extension of school.

The everyday reading behaviors of low-achieving students revealed in this study are the key to reading motivation for this group. This finding has strong implications for school library professionals who design and evaluate services for students. Most importantly, approaches to summer reading that center on the needs of low achievers rather than on the reading materials are needed. Library collections and summer reading programs that reflect reading preferences of low-achieving students make no distinction between the value of books and other materials. Selection and circulation policies that prohibit or exclude alternative media narrow the opportunities for low achievers to find engaging reading materials such as magazines, article clippings, multimedia, and websites that address students' diverse preferences and needs.

Rigorous research that is driven by a strong rationale for reading alternative media is needed to develop multiple models of reading approaches for all students, but particularly for low achievers. To this end, research-based reading practices are critical to successfully addressing questions raised by this study. Findings about the importance of the social, psychological, and emotion elements, as well as the academic benefits, of reading to the well-being of adolescents invite further research that examines literacy from a more holistic perspective.

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