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Reading Attitudes and Perceptions of 7th-8th Grade Students

PART I OF A RESEARCH REPORT BY **V. JAMES GAROFALO**

The information gathered on a reading attitude and perception survey of 370 middle schools students in the 7th and 8th grades over a three year period (1991-1994) is described below.

Population

The students were in a school district serving approximately 6,000 children. Thirteen percent of the district's student population were minority (Afro-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian-American). Twenty-seven percent of the families enrolling students in the district's schools met the federal definition for low-income homes. The school district is at the edge of a large urban area in western Michigan. The study was conducted in one of the two district's middle schools. Its building's student population (6th, 7th, 8th grade students) was in excess of 600 children each of the three school years.

The young people surveyed were at the beginning of an elective reading class (Exploring Books) that ran for a marking period. Twenty-seven percent of the surveyed students were classified as reluctant (do not like to read), non-readers (have not read a novel in a year) or both. Although special needs students enrolled in the classes, none of them fell into the category of reluctant, non-reader or both. The survey was completed by 44% in the first year, 33% in the second year, eight percent in the third year of all the 7th and 8th grade students. 49.6 percent of the students were females, and 13.5% were minorities.

A copy of the questionnaire may be found in Appendix A. It is the same survey described in Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* ... (pp. 271-2). Students' responses are detailed in table form in Appendix B and are described in percentages.

Reading Background

The reading background of the students is described in the number of books they reported in their home, how many they personally owned, and who taught them to read.

Students reported owning an average of 58 books and living in homes that had an average of 227 books. The range of answers in book ownership was from zero to 500 books. Books in the home ranged from zero to 300. The researcher attempted to verify numbers that seemed extremely high and made changes if parents suggested different numbers. Most responses were accepted as given by students.

Students' accounts of where they learned to read named *school* 41% of the time. Twenty-four percent felt they learned at *home* either from *parents*, *grandparents* or *siblings*. Twenty-three percent reported they learned to read from the combined efforts of *teachers* and *at-home helpers*. Twelve percent could not recall, or learned how to read *independent of school and home.*

Some could name the teacher, the book, and some even the actual environment (weather, time of day, physical description of the place) when they realized they could read. Most of these students struggled with the initial learning process. A handful of students could not remember a time when they could not read.

Summary: In a very general sense, the students in this study owned a significant number of books, came from homes where reading materials were available. They viewed themselves as knowing how to read and learned how to read at school, home or both places.

Student Perceptions

Students' perceptions of why adults read, how an individual becomes a good reader, and how a teacher decides a person is a good reader is described below.

Students believe others choose to read for enjoyment (recreational 36%), to learn something (educational 38%) or both recreational and educational (23%). Approximately three percent had no idea why other people wanted to read.

Students wrote that to become a good reader a person needed to read a lot (66%), want to enjoy the act of reading (9%), practice at comprehending reading materials' messages (12%), practice pronouncing words correctly (7%), have the ability to imagine what the written words were describing (imagination 1.5%). Four percent did not know what a person should do to be a good reader.

The seventh and eighth grade students believed that teachers decide what students are good readers by the quality of their oral reading (27%), students' knowledge of what was read (19%), both oral reading and comprehension (0.5%), the number of books a student had read (16%), a student freely choosing to read in their free time (8%), how quickly a student completes a reading assignment (5%) or a reading test score (3%). Eighteen percent did not know how a teacher identifies good readers.

Summary: Most students in this study believe others read for enjoyment, to learn something or both. Two-thirds of the students in this study agreed with most reading educators that the best way to become a better reader is to read. Their sense of how teachers decide on a good reader had no clear consensus. Although word calling, comprehending and both were selected by almost half the group, the third largest group of answers was they had no idea. Many teachers rely on some form of reading tests, but only three percent of the students felt teachers used reading tests to decide. This is a puzzling finding: although most teachers have a clear idea of what a good reader's characteristics are, apparently students are not picking up on this criteria.

Student Attitudes

Described below are students' attitudes about reading; whether they would choose to use leisure time to read — if so, how often; being read to; favorite authors and kinds of books.

On a continuum of extremely positive, through "it's okay," to don't like it, over two-thirds (68%) were very positive about reading. Sixteen percent of the students coming into the Exploring Books class did not like reading.

Fifty-eight percent chose to spend some of their leisure time at home reading; 42% did not. Of those choosing to read at home 28% chose to read every day, 19% some time every week, the rest less often or answered so vaguely it was not possible to determine how often they would read at home.

Sixty percent would not like to be read to in class.

About 68% of the students had and could name a favorite author. Of those 68% who named authors, the top five authors were Stephen King (20%), R.L. Stine (10%), Judy Blume (6%), Ann M. Martin (5%) and Christopher Pike (4%). Because many different authors were named, the authors were grouped by genre. Their favorite authors wrote horror stories (52%), realism (15%), romance (11%), fantasy (7%), adventure (5%), humor (5%), mystery and suspense (3%), and animal stories (2%).

When asked to name the kind of books they like to read, 96% of the students responded. The students had a somewhat different ranking than the one above created from the list of favorite authors. Mystery/suspense (24%), adventure (19%), horror (18%), any kind of fiction book (13%), realism (7%), romance (7%), fantasy (4%), humor (2%), animal stories (2%), and book features — size of print, number of pages and/or illustrations (4%).

Summary: As a group, 84% of the students in the study liked reading and 58% chose to read at home during their leisure time. The majority did not care for a teacher to read to them in class. Sixty-eight percent could name "favorite" authors. Authors of horror books were the choice of over half the students naming authors. When selecting favorite books by genre, 96% answered. Mystery and suspense was the single highest vote getter (24%). That genre combined with adventure (19%) and horror (18%) were the favorites of the majority of students.

Reading Behaviors

Students' reading behaviors are described in terms of the number of novels they have read in the last twelve months, how they go about selecting books and whether they have ever re-read a book.

The average number of novels read over the last twelve months was approximately nine books. Ninety-six percent of the students reported zero to 40 books read in this time period. Four percent of the students claimed to read between 50 and 100 books a year.

The front and back covers of a book are the basis of 53% of the book selection strategies of the students in this study. Although 7% had no plan for selecting a book, 17% read parts of the book before making a selection. Other choice factors cited were author and/or genre (10.5%), recommendation of peers and/or adults (5.7%) and physical features of a book — size of print, number of pages, quality and number of illustrations (4.8%).

Seventy percent of the students had re-read at least one book in their lifetime.

Discussion and Conclusions

Mellon (1990) found in a three-year study of rural seventh through twelfth grade students in North Carolina that 70% of the students read in their leisure time. The reasons most often given were for recreation and to acquire information. The most popular reading materials were magazines and newspapers.

Significantly fewer students chose to read in their leisure time in this survey (58%) compared to Mellon's study. When questioned the students claimed they had few "chunks" of time in which they were not interrupted. They named chores, phone calls, other scheduled activities (lessons, teams, church), homework, time with friends and the lure of television.

In contrast to Mellon's study, the students were asked about novel reading exclusively, not informational, newspaper or magazine reading. Students in this study named recreational, informational or both 97% of the time to explain why "adults" read.

Two studies of reading choice give some insight into how and what middle school students choose to read. Gerlach, *et. al.* (1992) found that 31 7th and 8th graders in a middle class suburban public school selected books in this order:

1. summary inside/front cover
2. illustration on the cover
3. title
4. interest in topic
5. size of print
6. difficulty of vocabulary
7. recommendation of peer or teacher.

The selection criteria of the young people in this study were heavily reliant

on the front (25.6%) and back (29.7%) covers of the books being chosen. Some (16.7%) would read part of the book before choosing. A small number (10.5%) would choose based on author and/or genre. Recommendations from peers and/or teacher affected 5.7% of the choices. The students in both studies seem to be similar.

Coy-Shaffer, *et. al.*'s (1992) study of 271 sixth grade middle school students identify the popularity of the following genres:

1. mysteries
2. adventure
3. scary
4. humor
5. romance
6. sports

Least: historical fiction, geography.

The top three in Coy-Shaffer, *et. al.*'s study and in this study are the same. Sports in this study was combined with adventure. Romance was more popular than humor (7.1% to 1.9%). Fiction in general (13%) and realism (7.3%) ranked fourth and fifth on this study and did not appear on Coy-Shaffer's list.

When favorite authors were grouped by types of stories written, the authors of horror were the choice of over half (51.9%) of the students. Authors of realism (14.9%) and romance (11%) ranked a distant second and third. The authors of adventure (5%) and mystery (3.2%) were hardly mentioned.

In Coy-Shaffer, *et. al.*'s study boys named few favorite authors. Judy Blume and Stephen King were mentioned more than others, but the choices were limited and widely scattered. Girls, on the other hand, named many author favorites; topping the list in the following order were Judy Blume, Ann Martin, Beverly Cleary, Stephen King, Francine Pascal, and Caroline Keene.

In this study the choices of boys and girls were not separated out of the total numbers. King, Blume, Martin, Cleary, and Pascal were in both of our top tens. A wide number of authors were named, with R.L. Stine, C. Pike, J. London, C.S. Lewis and R. Dahl also among the most frequently named. Over the three years S. King dropped in popularity, but was still the most often mentioned. R.L. Stine and F. Pascal increased in popularity over the three years, with Stine moving to second place.

The students in this study own books and are in homes that have lots of books. They think positively about reading and believe that to be a good reader, a person must read a lot. There appeared to be no clear consensus on how a teacher determines a "good" reader; testing was not seen as how that was measured. A majority (58%) chose to read in their leisure time, and the group as a whole averaged reading nine books in a year's time. Horror stories have the greatest appeal, with the front and back covers of the books being the most frequented path to book choice. Most did not like being read to in class. About a third of the group could not name a favorite author. Seven out of ten had reread at least one book in their lifetime.

A second article will appear in the next issue of *MRJ* to describe the elective reading class these students completed; changes in their reading attitudes, perceptions and behaviors; and a closer look at the reluctant and non-readers in the group.

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APPENDIX A: FORMS USED IN STUDY

PRE-COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE: ATWELL READING SURVEY

Name _____ Date_____

1. If you had to guess ...
   How many books would you say you owned? _____
   How many books would you say there are in your house? _____
   How many novels would you say you've read in the last 12 months? _____

2. How did you learn to read? _____

3. Why do people read? _____

4. What does someone have to do in order to be a good reader? _____
   _____

5. How does a teacher decide which students are good readers? _____
   _____

6. What kinds of books do you like to read? _____
   _____

7. How did you decide which books you'll read? _____
   _____

8. Have you ever re-read a book? _____
   If so, can you name it/them here? _____

9. Do you ever read novels at home for pleasure? _____
   If so, how often do you read at home (for pleasure)? _____
   _____

10. Who are your favorite authors? (list as many as you'd like) _____
    _____

11. Do you like to have your teacher read to you? _____
    If so, is there anything special you'd like to hear? _____
    _____

12. In general, how do you feel about reading? _____
    _____

APPENDIX B: TABULATION BY PERCENTAGES OF RESPONSES TO INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS ASKED ON THE PRE-COURSE QUESTIONNAIRE

Question One: If you had to guess ...

How many books would say you owned?

How many books would you say there are in your house?

How many novels would you say you've read in the last 12 months?

Table 1A: Average number of books students believe they own by year and mean for the entire group.

	Average owned	Range of answers
1991-92:	52.9 books	0-1000 books*
1992-93:	60.7 books	0-1500 books**
1993-94:	68.1 books	1- 450 books
1991-94:	58.2 books	0-1500 books

Note: Two students in 1993-4 group overestimated and figures were adjusted in consultation with parents.

* 1000 books given by one student, 16% of the students listed between 100 and 400 books; approximately 84% of the students listed between 0 and 80 books.

** One student listed 1500 books; 18% listed between one hundred and three hundred; 82% listed between 0-90 books.

Table 1B: Average number of books in students' homes by year and for the entire group.

	Average in home	Range of answers
1991-92:	212.3 books	0-3000 books*
1992-93:	225.3 books	0-3000 books**
1993-94:	322.6 books	2-3000 books
1991-94:	227.8 books	0-3000 books

* One student listed 502,000 books; the next highest was 3,000 books. The 502,000 was not used in tabulation after parents affirmed the number was not accurate.

** One student listed 10,000 books; but after parents said the number was much lower, the figure was not used.

Table 1C: Average number of novels read in last twelve months and range of responses by year and for entire group.

	Average read	Range of answers
1991-92:	8.6 books	0-100 books*
1992-93:	8.2 books	0-100 books**
1993-94:	17.0 books	0-100 books
1991-94:	9.3 books	0-100 books

* One student listed 100 books, next highest number was 50 books.

** 4% of students listed fifty to one hundred books; 96% listed less than 40 books.

Question Two: How did you learn to read?

Table 2: Percentage of responses to how did you learn to read by year and for entire group.

	School	Home	School/Home	Other*
1991-92:	49.7	18.9	21.2	10.0
1992-93:	36.8	30.5	25.6	6.9
1993-94:	11.7	23.5	20.5	44.1
1991-94:	40.8	24.0	22.9	12.0

*Other: other than school and home, no answer, don't remember

Question Three: Why do people read?

Table 3: Percentage of total responses to why people read, by year and for the entire group.

	Recreation (enjoyment)	Information (education)	Recr/Info (both)	Other*
1991-92:	36.1	39.3	21.8	2.6
1992-93:	35.0	39.7	23.1	1.9
1993-94:	44.1	26.4	23.5	5.8
1991-94:	36.4	38.3	22.5	2.6

*Other: no answer, don't know.

Question Four: What does someone have to do in order to be a good reader?

Table 4: Percentage of total number of responses to what someone has to do to be a good reader by year and for entire group.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
Read:	65.4	67.9	85.2	66.4
Affective:	11.8	7.8	0.0	8.9
Call Words:	9.1	5.8	5.8	7.3
Comprehension:	10.8	15.0	2.9	11.5
Imagination:	2.1	1.3	0.0	1.5
Don't Know:	5.9	1.9	5.8	4.1

Note: More than one response allowed.
read = read a great deal, practice reading regularly
affective = want to read, like to read
call words = pronounce words correctly in oral reading
comprehension = understand what you read
imagination = ability to have mind picture created from the printed word
don't know = no answer, do not know

Question Five: How does a teacher decide which students are good readers?

Table 5: Percentage of responses to how a teacher decides on which students are good readers by year and for entire group.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
Call words:	28.1	27.2	20.5	27.2
Comprehension:	24.6	14.4	11.7	19.4
Both:	0.0	1.3	0.0	0.5
# of bks rd:	14.5	20.3	2.9	15.8
Affective:	7.0	11.1	0.0	8.0
Tests:	1.5	5.2	5.8	3.3
Speed:	7.0	3.2	2.9	5.1
Don't know:	17.0	17.7	23.5	17.9

Note: More than one response from each student allowed.
Headings same as Table 4.
Both = call words and comprehension
# of bks rd = number of books read during school year
Tests = reading tests
Speed = how fast one completes task

Question Six: What kinds of books do you like to read?

Table 6: Percentage of all responses to kinds of books you like to read.

	1991-91	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
Mys/Sus:	23.9	24.8	21.1	23.8
Horror:	16.6	20.1	19.2	18.1
Adven.:	17.9	18.7	21.1	18.5
Fiction:	12.6	16.3	3.8	13.1
Romance:	7.9	6.2	5.7	7.1
Realism:	9.9	4.8	1.9	7.3
Fantasy:	4.9	3.3	0.0	3.9
Humor:	2.6	1.4	0.0	1.9
Animal:	0.9	2.8	0.0	1.6
Other:	2.3	1.4	26.1	4.2

Note: More than one response from each student was allowed.
1991-92. 96% of the students listed choices; 4% had no choices.
1992-93. 97% of the students listed choices; 3% had no choices.
1993-94. 88% of the students listed choices; 12% had no choices.
1991-94. 96% of the students listed choices; 4% had no choices.
Mys/Sus = mystery and suspense, includes detective stories
Horror = scary stories, killing and mayhem stories
Adventure = includes action and sports stories
General Fiction = includes read everything, like everything, etc.
Realism = includes non-fiction, mainly because most non-fiction people also listed realistic novels.
Fantasy = includes science fiction
Other = has to do with book features: size of print, length of book, number and quality of illustrations

Question Seven: How do you decide which books you'll read?

Table 7: Percentage of all responses to elements of book selection strategies (Students may list more than one element.)

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
Back Cover:	27.2	31.6	34.0	29.7
Front Cover:	28.6	24.2	17.0	25.6
Read parts:	19.7	17.5	0.0	16.7
Recommendations:	7.0	4.5	4.2	5.7
Genre/author:	7.5	13.5	12.7	10.5
No Plan:	7.5	5.0	10.6	6.8
Other (see Table 6):	2.3	3.3	21.2	4.8

Question Eight: Have you ever re-read a book? If so, can you name?

Table 8A: Percentage of students who have re-read a book.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
YES:	65.8	73.5	73.5	69.6
NO:	34.2	26.5	26.5	30.4

Table 8B: Percentage of students answering yes that could name one, two, three, or four or more titles.

	1 Title	2 Titles	3 Titles	4+ Titles	None
1991-92:	38.7	33.9	44.0	37.2	21.1
1992-93:	10.0	22.3	32.0	17.2	28.7
1993-94:	9.3	5.3	4.0	7.1	0.0
1991-94:	20.9	9.8	20.0	16.1	22.4

Question Nine: Do you ever read novels at home for pleasure? If so, how often do you read for pleasure?

Table 9A: Percentage of students who read novels at home for pleasure.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
YES:	56.6	60.4	50.0	57.5
NO:	43.4	39.6	50.0	42.5

Table 9B: Frequency of reading for pleasure at home of students answering yes to 9A question, reported in percentages.

	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Vague/ no answer
1991-92:	23.5	18.8	12.2	2.8	42.7
1992-93:	32.1	16.0	17.2	25.2	9.5
1993-94:	35.2	35.2	5.8	5.8	18.0
1991-94:	28.0	19.0	13.8	12.3	34.7

Question Ten: Who are your favorite authors?

Table 10A: List of the ten most-often cited authors by percentage of students who listed authors.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
S .King:	22.9	17.7	14.2	20.0
R.L. Stine:	7.0	11.0	21.4	9.9
J. Blume:	6.1	7.3	0.0	6.0
Ann M.Martin:	7.4	3.0	0.0	5.0
C. Pike:	4.8	4.2	0.0	4.1
J. London:	3.5	1.2	4.6	2.7
B. Cleary:	3.5	1.8	0.0	2.5
C.S. Lewis:	2.2	3.0	0.0	2.3
F. Pascal:	0.8	2.4	7.1	2.0
R. Dahl:	0.8	3.0	0.0	1.6

Note: Students could list more than one author.
70.5 % of the 91-92 students, 64.5% of the 92-93 students.
70.5% of the 93-94 students and 68.2 % of all students listed authors.

Table 10B: Grouping of authors listed by genre of the books they write, reported in percentage of total number of authors listed.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-94
Horror:	52.4	54.6	39.5	51.9
Realism:	15.4	13.4	16.2	14.7
Romance:	11.4	9.8	13.9	11.0
Fantasy:	4.4	9.2	9.3	6.6
Adventure:	5.7	5.5	0.0	5.0
Humor:	5.7	3.6	6.9	5.0
Mystery/Suspense	2.6	1.2	13.9	3.2
Animals:	2.2	2.4	0.0	2.0

Question Eleven: Do you like to have your teacher read to you? If so, is there anything special you like to hear?

Table 11: Percentage of students who like their teacher to read to them.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-1994
YES:	45.0	37.8	35.2	41.1
NO:	55.0	62.1	64.7	59.9

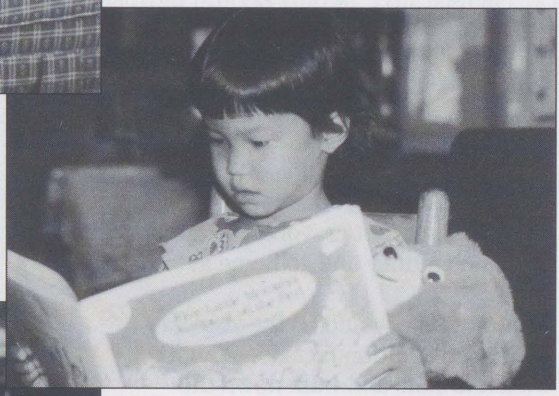
Note: The books listed were so scattered that there was no pattern found in genre, author or title to allow charting results.

Question Twelve: In general, how do you feel about reading?

Table 12: Percentage of students who have very positive, conditionally positive and negative attitudes about reading.

	1991-92	1992-93	1993-94	1991-1994
Very Positive:	46.0	55.5	50.0	50.1
Limited Positive:	36.6	29.7	30.5	33.4
Negative:	17.2	14.5	19.5	16.4

Read



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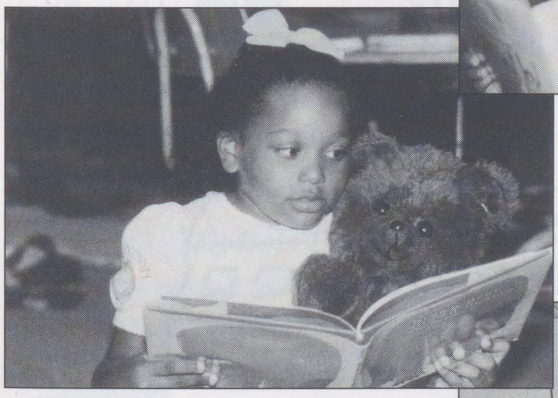

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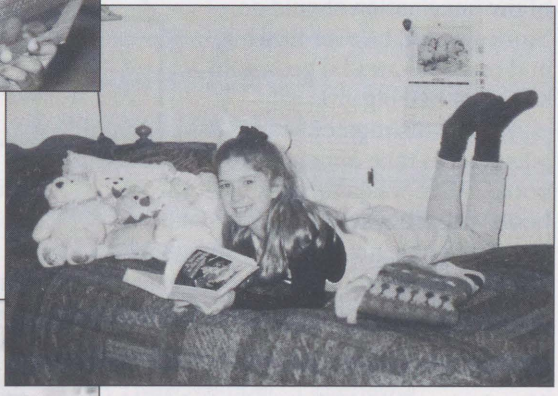

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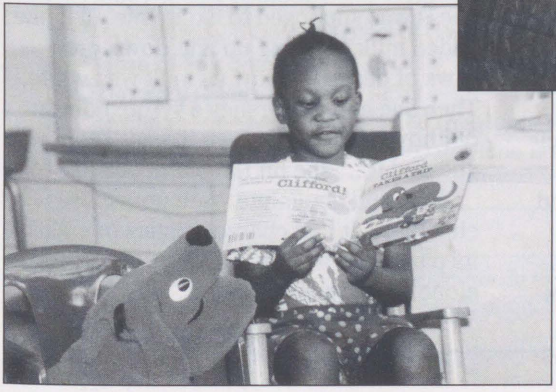

Today!