

The Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research
2016, Volume 2, Article 4, pp. 48-64.

The impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success

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Discovering ways to improve student academic performance is a common challenge in the modern classroom. This research study examined the reading habits of sixty-five high school juniors, aged fifteen to seventeen years, at a rural Southeast Texas high school. It was theorized that students who engaged in reading self-selected literature for pleasure would average higher grades in English, mathematics, science, and history than their non-reading peers. The authors concluded that students who read for pleasure averaged higher scores than their non-reading counterparts in the subject areas measured. The authors further concluded that educators were aware of the link between pleasure reading and academic success but felt limited by state curriculums and mandated tests.

Keywords: academic achievement, academic performance, independent reading, pleasure reading

The Impact of Pleasure Reading on Academic Success

A foundation in reading and writing has been the basis of our educational system since its inception and discovering new ways to increase student interest in those basic components of learning is something that every teacher struggles with at one time or another. Many educators encourage their students to read outside of the classroom in order to increase reading comprehension, vocabulary, general knowledge, and cultural awareness; however, research indicates that pleasure reading may have a greater influence on a child's overall academic performance than their socio-economic background (e.g. Pearson, 2015).

According to Bridges (2014), "Many of our revered celebrities and leaders are avid readers.

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Indeed, it's hard to find successful people who aren't" (p. 7). Reading opened up worldwide avenues for knowledge that non-readers were unable to access. Recent studies conducted by Kidd and Castano (2013) of The New School for Social Research in New York City, suggested that pleasure reading deepened empathy and temporarily allowed the reader a greater understanding of others' mental states (Wilhelm & Smith, 2014). In other words, the benefits of pleasure reading may have had a much broader impact than previously thought.

This study focused on comparing the overall academic success of pleasure readers (sometimes referred to as independent readers) and non-pleasure readers. According to Cullinan (2000), pleasure readers at all grade levels whom scored higher on standardized tests in all subject areas, developed greater reading comprehension skills, had increased fluency, and displayed higher levels of general knowledge. However, in spite of the evidence that pleasure reading had a positive impact on student academics, the number of students who read for pleasure has declined at an alarming rate. According to the National Endowment for the Arts (2007), "the percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20-year period" (p. 7). While the previous studies have focused on national reading patterns, this study focused on eleventh grade students at a rural Southeast Texas high school.

Although there have been studies (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007) done on the impact pleasure reading has on the overall academic success of students, there is a lack of data on the measureable differences in grade averages from specific subjects: English, mathematics, science, and history. This research was needed in order to determine if pleasure readers experienced increases in grade averages from core subjects, minimal increases in relationship to averages in core subjects, or if pleasure reading had no impact on students' overall performance in their core subjects.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study.

1. Did 11th grade students at a rural Southeast Texas high school who read for pleasure maintain higher grade averages than non-pleasure readers?
2. If pleasure readers experienced higher grade point averages than non-pleasure readers, would educators, in all subject areas, be more willing to encourage independent reading?

Limitations

Due to academic time constraints, this study was restricted to one nine-week grading period. The number of participants who were willing to complete the reading survey, and who returned their parental consent forms further limited the authors' research. Additionally, inquiries aimed to eleventh grade students aged fifteen to seventeen, narrowed the populace assessment.

Literature Review

Basic Reading

According to Clark and Rumbold (2006), reading for pleasure was defined as reading done in

anticipation of the satisfaction it would bring or continuing required reading because the reader found the subject matter interesting. Pleasure reading is a personal experience that “typically involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us” (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, p. 6). As such, a natural assumption was that students would be more willing to engage in an activity over which they had full control; however, recent studies (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; National Reading Panel, 2000; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007), on the reading habits of children indicated that instances of pleasure reading began to decrease around the age of thirteen and fourteen. Creel (2015) suggested that dissatisfaction with required reading contributed to student reluctance to read self-selected literature. Unfortunately, the decline in pleasure reading was counter-productive to student success. In fact, “Acquiring the habit of turning to books for pleasure or to find out what you want to know does more for reading development than working on decoding words or trying to speed up fluency” (Strauss, 2014, para. 2).

According to Common Sense Media (2012), 33% of thirteen-year-olds and 45% of seventeen-year-olds reported that they read for pleasure no more than one to two times per year. Additionally, only 19% of seventeen-year-olds read for fun on a daily basis, which was a drop of twelve percentage points from 1984 (Common Sense Media, 2014). As a result, student achievement also declined. Non-readers did not have the benefit of “the reciprocal effects of reading volume” and the resulting increase on “students’ knowledge” (Horbec, 2012, p. 59).

“Through independent reading children gain a wealth of background knowledge about many different things, come to understand story and non-fiction structures, absorb the essentials of English grammar, and continuously expand their vocabularies” (Strauss, 2014, para. 9). Pleasure reading would obviously have a positive influence on reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary; however, the impact it has on student success in other core subjects could not be understated. Reading provided background knowledge and comprehension skills necessary for student achievement in the sciences, mathematics, and history. In fact, a study by the Institute for Education found that pleasure readers had a 14.4% advantage in vocabulary and a 9.9% advantage in math (Sellgren, 2013). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) and Fulks (2010) maintained that there was a positive relationship between pleasure reading and achievement in mathematics.

Economic Considerations

Significant research by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, or OECD, (2002) was conducted on how socio-economic status and parental education levels related to student success. Their research indicated that the reading habits of adolescent students may have had a greater influence on student achievement than both socio-economic status and the level of education attained by parents. According to Sellgren (2013), the Institute for Education determined that, “The influence of reading for pleasure was greater than that for having a parent with a degree” (para. 7-8). As academic success pertained to socio-economic status, economically disadvantaged students learned at the same pace as middle class students during the school year (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007); however, the learning gap widened during the summer months. Low-income students lost two or three months of reading growth during the summer, while their middle-class counterparts experienced a month of reading growth (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2015).

The gap in reading levels and lack of pleasure reading in poor neighborhoods could be attributed to the following:

Students from lower-income families experience summer reading loss because they don’t read much, if at all, during the summer months. Students from middle-class families, on the other

hand, are far more likely to read during this same summer period. Low-income students don't read during the summer months because they don't own any books, and they live in neighborhoods where there are few, if any, places to purchase books. Middle-class students have bedroom libraries and live in neighborhoods where children's books are readily available, even in the grocery stores where their parents shop. (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2015, para. 6)

This would suggest that it was not socio-economic status that affected student success, rather the ability to access and utilize books. Of course, one of the primary reasons economically disadvantaged students did not have the ability to use and access books was directly related to their families' financial status. Therefore, rather than being independent from one another, it was more likely that socio-economic status played a primary role in the reason why economically disadvantaged children did not engage in pleasure reading (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2008).

It is possible to reduce the gap between the overall academic success of middle-class students and economically disadvantaged students by simply providing greater access to books, and encouraging children to actively engage in pleasure reading outside of the classroom. According to Krashen (1993),

When children read for pleasure, when they get "hooked on books," they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called "language skills" many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level. Without it, I suspect that children simply do not have a chance. (p.85)

Contradictory Opinions

In contrast to popular opinion, a study released by the National Reading Panel (2000) argued against providing time for students to engage in reading self-selected literature in the classroom. The report did not find any substantial evidence that increased students' reading time in the classroom had any bearing on reading ability (National Reading Panel, 2000). As a result of this study thousands of educators concluded that pleasure reading didn't matter, and policymakers began reducing independent, self-selected, reading time in favor of increased direct reading instruction (Sanden, 2014). One of the biggest considerations for eliminating pleasure reading from the school day was time. According to Pennington (2011), there just were not enough minutes in the school day for small blocks of silent pleasure reading to have any real impact on student achievement. In short, if there was not enough time to develop any measureable improvements on student reading comprehension and vocabulary, why bother?

Literature Summary

Pleasure reading builds reading comprehension, increases background knowledge (which is useful in all content areas), increases student vocabulary skills, and has been shown to increase our understanding of human behavior and help us to empathize with others (Murphy, 2013). Pleasure readers not only experience greater success academically than their non-reading counterparts, pleasure readers go on to experience greater success in the workforce (National Endowment of the Arts, 2007). Many language arts educators are aware of the benefits of pleasure reading and make every effort to

immerse students in a wide selection of literature (Cullinan, 2000); however, schools, at all levels, fail to establish a culture that values reading (Rich, 2007).

There is a lack of current research on the potential academic and long-term benefits pleasure reading has for high school students. The large-scale studies (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007; Allington & McGill-Frazen, 2015; National Reading Panel, 2000; Sellgren, 2013) reviewed for this research primarily focused on the importance of developing independent readers in elementary school. Other large scale studies (Clark & Rumbold, 2006; National Endowment for the Arts, 2007) indicated that pleasure reading and academic success were directly related; however, there were factors that needed to be explored further (i.e. Are fiction readers or non-fiction readers more successful? Do specific genres influence academics in different ways? How much time should be spent reading to improve student academic performance? Reading is the foundation on which academic and personal success can be built, and teaching students to love reading may fundamentally change the educational process.

Methodology

General Description

This research utilized an embedded design, in that both quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same time frame. The quantitative approach dominated this study, with the qualitative worked as a secondary role. This study was designed to determine the potential academic benefits of pleasure reading. Student participants were given a ten questions quantitative survey in order to ascertain their current and past reading habits. Educator participants answered a five questions qualitative interview (see Appendix B) to determine their philosophy on reading and what role, if any, educators should have on encouraging student reading.

Participants

The participants in this study were eleventh grade English III students at a rural Texas high school whose ages ranged from fifteen to seventeen years old and current educators whose experience ranged from a second-year teacher to thirty plus years teaching experience. The student participants in this study included both honors and level English III students. All participants in this study were from varied ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (see Table 1), and the study included both male and female students and teachers. The 63 student participants were divided into two groups: those who self-identified as pleasure readers and those who did not read for leisure. Educators from all core content areas (English, history, mathematics, and the sciences) were represented in this study.

All student participants were selected based upon enrollment in the researcher's English III classes. While the researcher's teaching load of 105 students were given the opportunity to participate in the study, only 65 students returned both the participant consent forms and parental consent forms. Educator participants were selected randomly from each of the high school core content area of English, mathematics, science, and history.

Table 1
Ethnicity of Participants

	Number of Students	Percentage of Participants
White - Non Hispanic	35	54%
Hispanic	15	23%
African American	13	20%
Asian	1	2%
Other	1	2%

Note. The majority, 54%, of the participants in this study were White – Non Hispanic, as shown in Table 1. Hispanics represented 23% of the participants, African Americans represented 20% of the participants, Asians represented 2% of the participants, and 2% were represented by “Other” ethnicities.

Instrument

The research survey gathered data through student input and made use of several Likert-type scale systems (see Appendix A). When “enjoyment of pleasure reading” was measured the survey range was: not at all, rarely, some, often, or a great deal. When measuring “past reading” the survey range was: never finished an entire book, rarely finish a book, one book every three-six months, one book per month, or at least one book per week. When “time spent reading for at least thirty minutes” was measured the survey range was: zero days, one-two days, three-four days, five-six days, or every day. Students were asked to provide a “yes” or “no” response when asked if greater access to books would increase the amount of time spent reading. The interview questions for educators were open-ended in nature and measured teacher opinion on the academic success and behavioral differences between pleasure readers and non-pleasure readers.

Procedure

Student participants were asked to answer a ten-questions survey in regard to their reading habits. Participants had the option to answer all, some, or none of the questions. The number of students who completed both the survey and returned their parental consent form determined the total number of student participants. Student averages for the first nine weeks of instruction was collected from the counselor’s office. Student survey responses and grade averages were recorded in an EXCEL spreadsheet.

Educator participants were asked to answer five open-ended questions in regard to their opinions in implementing and/or encouraging self-selected reading in their classrooms (see Appendix B). The number of educators who agreed to be interviewed determined the total number of educator participants; however, each of the four core content areas was represented for accuracy and fairness. Educator responses were gathered via email and compared to determine similarities and differences in opinions across content areas.

Student Data Analysis

This research surveyed sixty-five high school students to determine their pleasure reading habits. The goal of this research was to determine if, within the confines of a nine weeks grading period, pleasure-readers perform better academically, specifically in English, mathematics, science, and history, than their non-reading counterparts.

The data for this research was collected at the end of the first nine weeks grading period of the 2015-16 school year. Of the sixty-five students who returned their survey and consent forms, only nineteen, 29%, were identified as pleasure readers. The remaining forty-six students surveyed, or 71% of participants, maintained that they either very rarely or never read for pleasure.

The vast majority of students did not engage in pleasure reading. In addition to not enjoying reading, or viewing it as a pleasurable activity, 20% of the student participators reported as never having finished a book, and 51% of participators reported as reading two or fewer books per year – including required reading for school. The majority of students, 54%, would read more if they had greater access to books, and only 32% of participants personally own fifteen or more books. Table 2 shows the reading habits of the student participators.

Table 2
Student Reading Habits

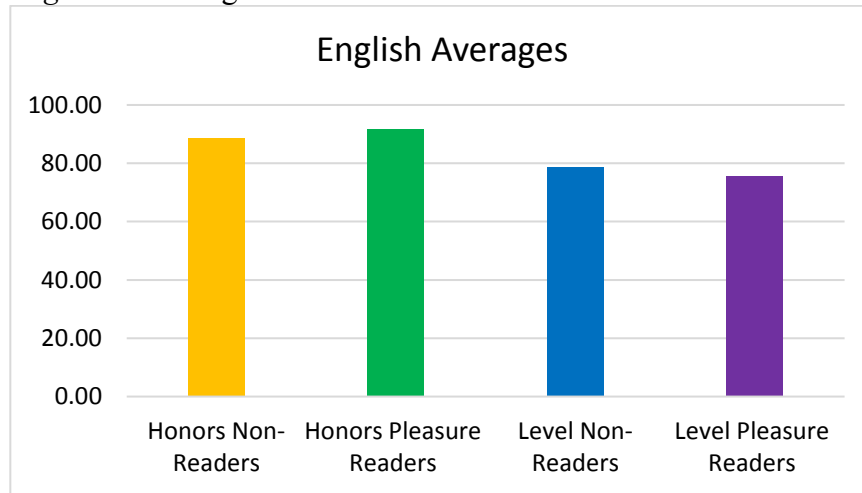
	Number of Students	Percentage of all participants
Students who have never finished a book	13	20%
Students who read two or fewer books per year	33	51%
Students who would read more with greater access to books	35	54%
Students who personally own fifteen or fewer books	44	68%

Note. Twenty percent out of 13 participants reported never finishing a book, this represented 65% of the total in this category. Fifty-one percent out of 33 participants read 2 or fewer books, which represented 60% of the total in this category. Fifty-four percent out of 35 claimed had read more and had greater access to literature, exemplified 65% of the total in this group. Sixty-eight percent reported they owned 15 or fewer books, which signified 65% of this group.

At the conclusion of the nine weeks, pleasure readers, though largely outnumbered by non-readers, averaged higher grades in all four measured areas: English, history, math, and science. Pleasure readers experienced a marginal advantage in English and the sciences; however, pleasure readers experienced a significant advantage in mathematics and history. Honors level non-pleasure reading students did maintain higher combined averages than level students, but that was not unexpected.

As stated above, pleasure readers experienced only a marginal advantage over non-readers in English III. The average grade for Honors and level non-readers were 88.63% and 78.63%, respectively. Honors and level students who identify as pleasure readers averaged grades of 91.82% and 75.63%, respectively. Figure 1 shows the combined averages for pleasure readers and non-pleasure readers as they pertained to English.

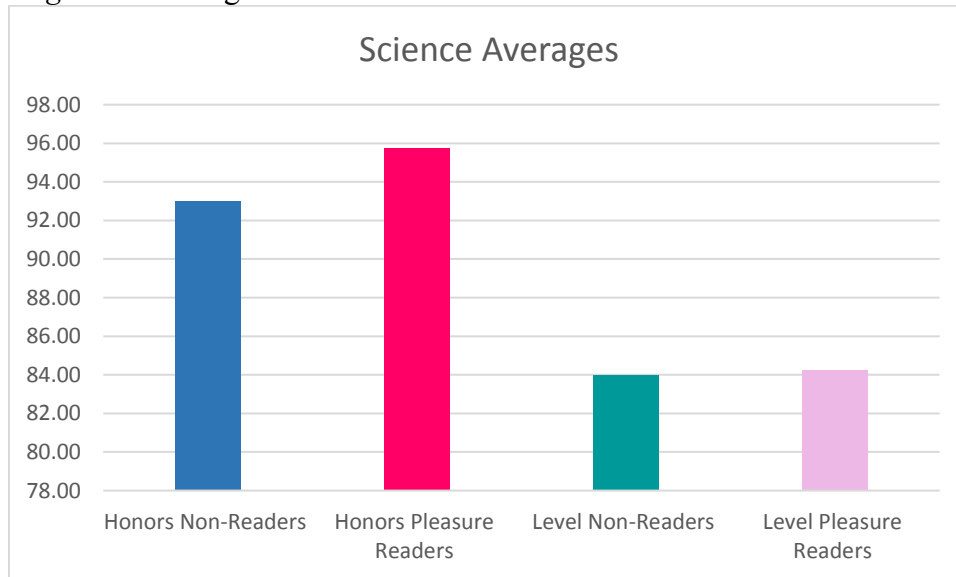
Figure 1. Averages of Pleasure Readers and Non-Pleasure Readers



Note. Bar graph shows the averages between English pleasure readers and non-pleasure readers.

Accordingly, English students and pleasure readers experienced a marginal advantage over non-readers in the sciences. In regard to junior level science, Honors and level non-reading students averaged 93% and 83.97%, respectively. Honors level pleasure readers averaged 95.73% and level students averaged 84.25%. Figure 2 illustrates the combined averages for pleasure readers and non-pleasure readers as they pertained to the sciences.

Figure 2. Averages of Science Non-Readers

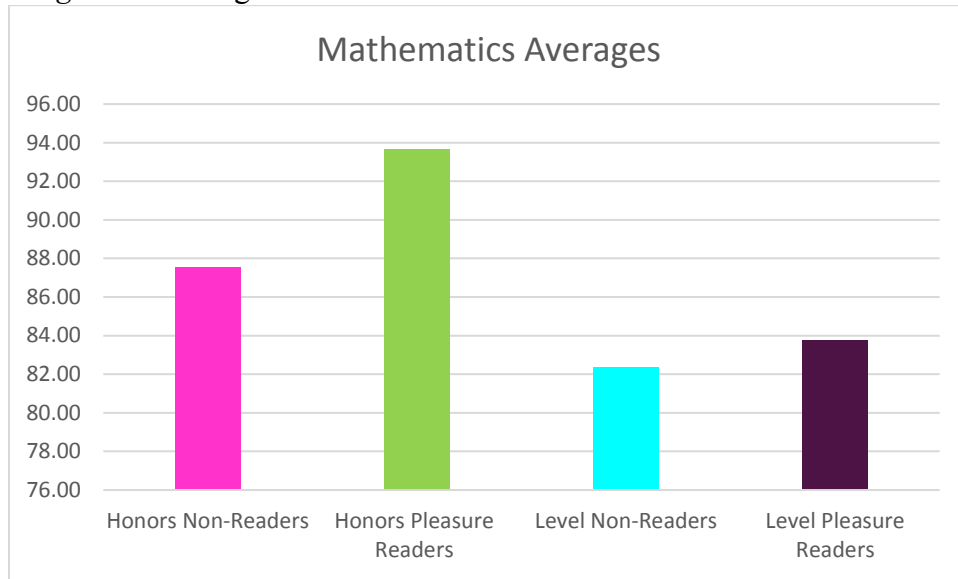


Note. This bar graph shows the differences between science non-pleasure readers and pleasure readers in science.

Pleasure readers achieved the largest gains over their non-reading counterparts in mathematics. Non-reading honors and level students averaged grades of 87.53% and 82.33%, respectively; however, pleasure-reading students produced average scores of 93.64% (Honors) and 83.75% (level). Figure 3

demonstrates the combined averages for pleasure readers and non-pleasure readers as they pertained to mathematics.

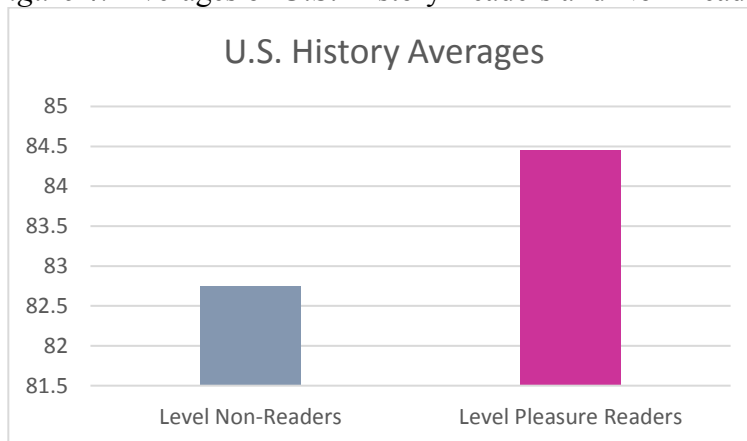
Figure 3. Averages of Mathematics Pleasure and Non-Pleasure Readers



Note. Bar graph illustrates the differences between mathematics non-readers and English pleasure readers.

Consequently, the number of student scores available for U.S. history differ from other core subjects. This study’s rural Southeast Texas high school, like many other schools across the country, offers Dual Credit United States History to its students; therefore, the researcher was not privy to the averages of the students enrolled in dual credit. As a result, the nine weeks averages for U.S. history were limited to level students only; however, pleasure readers still experienced higher averages than their non-reading counterparts. Non-readers had a combined average of 82.75%, while pleasure readers presented a combined average of 84.45%. Figure 4 illustrates the combined averages for pleasure readers and non-pleasure readers as they pertained to U.S. History.

Figure 4. Averages of U.S. History Readers and Non-Readers



Note. Bar graph illustrates U.S. history reading averages between pleasure readers and non-

pleasure readers.

Furthermore, while non-reading level students earned a higher nine weeks average, by 3.0 percentage points, than their level pleasure reading counterparts in English, pleasure readers earned higher averages, for both honors and level students, in every other subject. Additionally, pleasure reading honors students outscored their non-reading counterparts by a high enough margin, 3.19 percentage points, to raise the overall average in English for pleasure readers above their non-reading counterparts – albeit only marginally.

Educator Interviews

Educators interviewed for this study-expressed interest in further exploring the benefits of pleasure reading in the classroom. Teachers from the four core content areas measured, agreed that encouraging students to engage in self-selected pleasure reading was beneficial, even essential, to “developing successful learners” (personal interview, November 12, 2015). Educators also agreed that high schools no longer offer students class time to engage in pleasure reading because there was not time to do so. State mandated curriculum requirements and the ever increasing number of standardized tests have forced teachers to use their class time satisfying state standards and preparing students for state testing. According to one well-respected teacher, “pleasure reading is not an objective, although it would contribute to better performance on the tests” (personal interview, November 11, 2015).

Those teachers interviewed agreed that pleasure readers not only earn higher scores in their respective classes, but readers were better equipped to express themselves in writing. Teachers agreed that the shorthand used in texting, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, et al, has had a negative impact on student writing across content areas. Teachers agreed that pleasure reading, while not a cure-all for writing woes, exposed students to higher-level vocabulary, proper sentence structure, and syntax; as a result, pleasure readers often wrote at more advanced levels than their peers.

Interestingly, the teachers interviewed for this research project disagreed on providing class time for students to read self-selected literature, and half of the teachers interviewed maintained that providing class time for students to read would be counterproductive to their classroom management plan because so few students would actually participate in silent reading. One teacher estimated that fewer than 50% of her students would choose to participate and “since most students would not be reading, this would quickly lead to class management issues” (personal interview, November 12, 2015).

While teachers were divided in regard to allowing class time for pleasure reading, they were in complete agreement that reading, all reading was on the decline. The teachers interviewed for this project offered several reasons why they believe students no longer read for fun. Those reasons included, but were not limited to the following:

- People whom the students admire did not model reading.
- Burnout from Accelerated Reading (AR) programs in elementary, intermediate, and junior high school.
- Parents who did not encourage reading or who are poorly educated and, therefore, do not value reading.
- Students were overcommitted to jobs, clubs, and extra-curricular activities.
- Students having underdeveloped imaginations due to being constantly inundated with technology.

Summary

Educators are frequently looking for new and innovative ways to improve student performance in the classroom. Substandard writing skills, poor reading comprehension skills, low-level vocabulary, and lackluster scores on standardized tests are legitimate concerns in many school districts. The data collected in this study would indicate that there is a possible solution to the academic concerns plaguing many school districts. It was postulated that students who read self-selected literature for pleasure would experience greater academic success than their non-reading peers.

The authors concluded that students who chose to read self-selected literature for pleasure performed better in English, mathematics, science, and history. Students who engage in pleasure reading experienced marginal average increases of .11% in English and 1.71% in science and higher increases of 4.43% in mathematics and 2.05% in history.

Student responses to the reading survey and educator responses to interview questions indicated that pleasure reading was on the decline. Students were preoccupied with technology and social media, overworked, and the majority, 71% of those surveyed, did not value reading. Educators, from the content areas measured, agreed that pleasure reading would improve student performance in the classroom. Those educators interviewed had observed higher-level vocabulary, an advanced ability to communicate in writing across content areas, and increased fluency in their students who chose to read. While the educators interviewed for this study disagreed on including time for students to read self-selected literature in the classroom due to potential behavioral issues, they unanimously agreed that pleasure reading was an essential component for academic and future success.

Interpretation

Pleasure reading among teens aged fifteen to seventeen is on the decline. While teens gave various reasons for electing to forgo reading for fun, professionals in education agreed that choosing to read self-selected literature for pleasure can, and did, improve student academic performance. The decline of pleasure reading among teens could be responsible, at least in part, to low-level vocabulary development, subpar writing skills, and unsatisfactory performance in science, math, and history.

Reading helps students think critically and improves reading comprehension skills, which is beneficial in every subject area measured in this study. However, the benefits of pleasure reading do not end in the classroom. Students take the skills they have honed through reading into adulthood and, in turn, into the workforce and society.

Unfortunately, in spite of indications that pleasure reading is overwhelmingly beneficial to student progress, state-mandated testing, state curriculums, and an ever increasing push to incorporate more technology into the classroom reduce the amount of time students have available to spend reading while in school. Jobs, that are often necessary for the financial well-being of the student's family, extra-curricular activities, the pull of social media, and active social lives limit the amount of time students have available to read outside of the classroom. Re-establishing reading as a valuable activity may help to rekindle student interest in reading for pleasure.

Implications for Future Research

Further research is needed in order to determine if the results of this study are applicable on a broader scale. Continued research would indicate whether pleasure readers experience additional academic advances outside of the parameters of this study and, in theory, further validate the

advantages of reading for fun. Due to this study being limited to juniors at one high school during one nine week grading period, it would be beneficial to replicate this research at other schools, with a larger participant pool over an extended period of time, in order to determine if the results would be the same or similar. Data collection by gender with respect to reading habits may indicate whether males or females obtain higher grade point averages based on their pleasure reading habits. Additional student data with regards to the programs in which the students participate (honors, dual credit, on level, or Advanced Placement) may give insights into the extent pleasure reading impacts such program enrollment and influences grade point averages.

In a brief conclusion, this study found that the pleasure-readers who participated received higher average grades during one 9-week grading period over their non-pleasure reading peers in the core subjects of English, math, science, and history. The study further concluded that educators in the core subjects agreed that pleasure reading were beneficial, even essential, to student development and achievement.

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9. Why do you think people read?

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

Appendix B

Educator Interview Questionnaire

Interview Questions for teachers:

1. What is your philosophy on reading (specifically self-selected pleasure reading)?
2. If studies show that pleasure reading improves student performance, why do you think that high schools do not allow class time for students to read self-selected literature?
3. We tend to focus on how much our students struggle with writing. Do you think it is possible that our students write poorly because they rarely read and are not exposed to examples of good writing?
4. If it could be proved that pleasure reading has a positive impact on academic success and student behavior, would you be willing to allow students time to read self-selected literature in your class?
5. In your opinion, why do so few students read for pleasure?