Reading Habits of Behaviorally Disordered Males: A Study

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Numerous surveys are conducted each year, both formally and informally, to determine what adolescents are reading. However, the reading tastes of one segment of this age group, the behaviorally disordered adolescent male, have at this time not been adequately assessed. Attempts to measure the natural reading behaviors of this group often meet failure because most of these pupils simply do not read in the public school if they can avoid it. Nolte (1973) notes: "Studies of youth disorders and juvenile delinquency consistently show that children who get in trouble seldom read anything at all. One team of prominent researchers, for example, compiled a list of ninety factors that might promote or explain delinquent behavior. Reading was not one of them. Ignorance, after all, is perhaps the weakest of all defenses against evil."

Edwards (1969), in The Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts, has said, "It is essential, it seems to me, for the library to revise its middle class approach and devise new ways of making books a part of the lives of these
people who desperately need the ideas found in books."

This study sought to evaluate some aspects of the reading interests and tastes of a group whose special relationships with books have previously been very poorly defined. The sample studied was chosen randomly from among 450 delinquent adolescents between thirteen and nineteen years of age who were confined in a Georgia youth offender center. The subjects were characterized by severe social, emotional, and learning problems. They represented the range of law violations from minor infractions to major crimes. They also exhibited a wide range of personal reactions to school and reading, dominated by a very low regard for both.

It has been generally agreed that people in confining situations usually do more reading than they would if there were less demanding, thus more attractive, activities on which to spend their time. Such was the case with this population. Because they were confined and did considerable reading, some data were collected which can be useful in developing programs to stimulate changes in the reading behavior of similarly disordered pupils.

The center where these subjects were housed had a Georgia Association accredited high school. It also had a library that was sufficiently large and varied in its collection of books to meet most reading needs. It was staffed by a qualified librarian and a part-time clerical aide. During 1973, over 7000 books were checked out by a population of approximately 700 pupils who had regular access to the library and were free to check out books for a two-week period. Also, small collections from the main library were housed in each cottage for use by the pupils.

Circulation of books is not a good index of true reading behavior among these boys. Therefore, interviews were undertaken to define the extent of book completion for this population. Out of these interviews came the following information: 1) the relationship between method of book selection and percentage of books read; 2) the relationship between books selected and books completed by categories, based on the Dewey Decimal classification system; 3) the most popular fiction titles read, based on checkout records; and 4) the most popular biography read, based on checkout records.

When books were returned, the checkout cards were collected and a randomized assignment of subjects to be interviewed was made. During the interview each subject was asked if he had read the book. If he stated that he had, then he was asked to talk about the book. Based on this discussion, a determination was made as to whether or not the book had been read by using these criteria: 1) If the pupil could quote only limited facts or none at all, the book was classified as not having been read. 2) The ability to get the main idea or express an opinion about the book at the critical thinking level was classified as having been read. 3) Books checked out for reference purposes were counted as having been read if it was determined by evidence that the book had served the purpose for which it was checked out. Eighty-two individual interviews were held.

The study revealed that 44 percent of the subjects interviewed completed the books they had checked out. This was considered a dramatic increase
Table 1

Percentage of Selection by Each Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shelf</td>
<td>74.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Card catalog</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book citation</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Reading Success/Failure Rate by Method of Selection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Selection</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shelf</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not completed</td>
<td>55.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>71.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not completed</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not completed</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No books were completed in any of the other categories of selection.

over this population's normal public school book reading behavior which, by adjudication of librarians and teachers, is normally at or near the zero percent level. It was felt to be important to identify methods of selection as related to success/failure rate and classification of book as related to success/failure rate. Based on results from looking at the relationship of classification to success/failure rate, it was decided to look at the most popular titles in the two highest success categories.

Method of selection of books was determined during the pupil interview, and the results by percentage are shown in Table 1.

As might be expected, the overwhelming method of selection was that pupils selected books directly from the shelf. These percentages generally hold true in most school libraries and for most populations because: 1) many adolescents prefer to do or find things for themselves; 2) the librarian or teacher may not be available 3) many adolescents are reluctant to ask for help; and 4) there is a lack of positive leadership in school libraries in which the librarian should, but does not, function as a remediator and motivator to the nonreading students.

Looking at the success/failure rate, Tables 2 and 3 reveal some very significant data. Table 2 compares success and failure within each selection method. It is significant that through helping them select books, librarians and teachers had a dramatic influence on students' rate of book completion. Therefore, providing reading guidance to these pupils can be very successful when implemented.

Although this is the age at which peer influence is greatest, this did not play a large role in book selection. Even more significant is that this influence did not contribute at all to successful completion of a book. In looking at the reading success/failure rate according to book classification, four categories provided the major data from which conclusions might be drawn (Table 3).

Although books in recreational and performing arts were checked out almost as frequently as biography, they were not completed as often as the bi-
Table 4
Fiction Titles
To Your Scattered Bodies Go, Philip Jose Farmer
I Never Loved Your Mind, Paul Zindel
NiHy Gritty, Frank Bonham
Werewolf, Bruce Lowery
Two Towers, G. R. R. Tolkien
Drop Out, Jeannelle Eyerly
Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain
Kidnapped, Robert Louis Stevenson
Airport, Arthur Hailey
Werewolf, Bruce Lowery
Two Towers, J. R. R. Tolkien
I Never Loved Your Mind, Paul Zindel
NiHy Gritty, Frank Bonham
To Your Scattered Bodies Go, Philip Jose Farmer

Table 5
Biography
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Ormond DeKay, Jr.
John F. Kennedy, Patricia Miles Martin
Abraham Lincoln, Barbara Carey
Black and Free, Thomas Skinner
Daniel Boone, Patricia Miles Martin
Nell Turner, Judith Griffin
George Washington Carver, Rackham Holt
Elvis Presley, Jerry Hopkins
I Am a Man: Ode to Martin Luther King, Jr., Eve Merriam
Run Baby Run, Nicky Cruz
Come Out Smokin’, Philip Pepe
Unbought and Unbossed, Shirley Chisolm

Interest in several nonfiction areas was almost as high as in fiction and biography, but there was not as great an amount of material published in these nonfiction areas on a reading level suitable for this age group.

The two classifications with the highest success rates were fiction and biography. The titles listed in Tables 4 and 5 were those which were checked out most frequently by different subjects in these two classifications.

To Your Scattered Bodies Go was the most popular fiction title. The next four books listed were a close second. It is interesting to note that only one best seller was on the list. Three classics were included. Books about drugs were also well read by this group, as they are with most adolescents today.

The biography listing includes “books about a person” or lists particular titles. In this category, books about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were by far the most popular.

This study found a relatively high rate of book completion by behaviorally disordered adolescent males. It was also noted that the success rate could be very significantly affected by librarians and teachers through reading guidance.

Fiction and biography provided the best sources from which to draw in stimulating more reading among these youth. Hopefully, more stimulating and readable materials are becoming available in nonfiction which will lead to increased success in getting these pupils to read.

Title listings in fiction and biography reveal that their interests often paralleled the interests of all adolescents. This group also had a strong interest in ghost stories and their interest in drugs was probably stronger than usual. Many of their popular selections indicated an interest in how people face adversity, something to which they feel they can relate very well.

There is a great need for the library science community to develop a special competency in understanding, selecting books for, and motivating
the reading performance of the behaviorally disordered adolescent male. A positive attitude and behavior toward book reading desperately needs to be extended to these students. The results of this study clearly indicate that the effort to guide the reading behavior of these students will pay dividends in an increased level of book completion.

References

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