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Teens and pleasure reading: A critical assessment from Nova Scotia

Abstract: This paper reports on the first phase of a two-part research study into the role of pleasure reading in the lives of Nova Scotia teenagers. Phase one, a quantitative survey, provides essential background context for the second phase, which uses qualitative methodology to illuminate and enrich the findings from the preliminary survey research.

Résumé : Cet article présente la première phase d'une recherche en deux parties étudiant le rôle de la lecture de loisir dans la vie des adolescents de Nouvelle-Écosse. La première phase, un sondage quantitatif, offre un contexte essentiel pour la deuxième phase, qui utilise une approche méthodologique qualitative pour éclairer et enrichir les résultats du sondage préliminaire.

1. Background

A 1995 survey by the National Center for Educational Statistics in the United States, Services and Resources for Children and Young Adults, concluded that almost 25% of public library users are teenagers; in other words, one out of every four individuals entering a public library is between the ages of 12 and 18. (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Clearly, teens are an important public library user group, with needs and concerns very distinct from those of either children or adult users. However, as Virginia Walter (2003) very effectively demonstrates in her recent article "Public library service to children and teens: A research agenda," the research community has spent little time investigating either the information needs or the information-seeking behaviour of teens. This gap is certainly as true for Canadian teens as it is for their American counterparts.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the early years of the phenomenon known as young adult literature, several researchers (Landy, 1974; Lewis, 1976; Burdenuk, 1979; Amey, 1981) undertook studies of Canadian young adult reading habits. These studies reached several important conclusions:

- Girls read more than boys
- Television, sports, movies, and radio are all more popular than reading
- TV or movie tie-ins can dramatically increase a book's popularity
- Friends are very influential in determining teens' reading choices
- Librarians, both school and public, exert very little influence on teens' reading choices

However, despite teens' perception that they were little influenced by librarians in their reading choices, most teens during this period used both the school and the public library as their primary sources of leisure reading material and did not commonly purchase their own books.

Today, it is apparent that the Canadian social situation is significantly different from the 1970s. In many jurisdictions, funding for school libraries has declined dramatically while at the same time the discretionary spending power of teens has undergone an equally dramatic increase. Both libraries and independent booksellers are besieged by the "big box" chain bookstores. Furthermore, 21st century teens have a wealth of previously unknown multimedia options available to them. Time formerly spent reading a book or magazine can now be spent playing a computer game, surfing the net, or interacting with friends in an online chatroom. What impact have these factors had upon teens' public library use and leisure reading habits?

Recently, two national, bilingual quantitative studies have been conducted. Opening Doors for Children (2005) investigates the reading habits and public library use patterns of children in grades 4 to 6 (ages 9-12). Another key study, Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure, was conducted by the department of Canadian Heritage in January 2005. This study was the first major survey of Canadian reading and book-purchasing habits since the 1991 survey Reading in Canada. In this national telephone survey, 1,963 Canadians aged 16+ were asked about their reading behaviours and preferences, their reading skills, their attitudes towards reading, their use of the public library, and their book-buying habits. In contrast to the 2004 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) poll of Americans and their reading habits (Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America), this survey concluded that reading for pleasure in Canada is a "solidly established and widespread habit with little or no change over the last 15 years." Eighty-seven percent of Canadians read at least occasionally (in contrast to only 47.6% of Americans) and 54% of Canadians read every day. Only 13% of Canadians self-identify as nonreaders, the same percentage as in 1991, in contrast to the 43% of Americans who self-identify as non-readers according to the NEA poll. Canadians appear to be distinctly different from their American counterparts, over half of whom read an average of less than one book per year and whose reading rate has substantially decreased over the past 20 years, particularly among those in the 18-24 year-old age group.

Although Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure presents a generally positive view of the leisure reading habits of adult Canadians, the report does not examine the reading habits of children or younger teens and includes a call for further research on these groups: "More in-depth research on very young Canadians [i.e. those aged less than 16] would certainly add to and enhance our current knowledge about the adult population." (2)

The one group that remains unstudied is younger teens, aged 12-15, and both the recent national studies cited above recommend that the reading habits of this age group be a subject of investigation particularly since several previous international studies have

tracked the beginning of the decline of pleasure reading and public library use during this critical age range.

Therefore the goal of this ongoing study is to investigate the reading habits and public library use patterns of the junior high school age group (grades 7-9). This paper reports on the first phase of a two-part research study into the role of recreational or pleasure reading in the lives of Nova Scotia teenagers. Phase one, a preliminary quantitative survey, analyzes whether there is a significant relationship between age, gender, and level of parental education and teenagers' reading, book purchasing, and library usage patterns in the province of Nova Scotia. Findings are discussed in the context of similar studies by a range of Canadian and international researchers from the 1970s to the present day. The preliminary survey described in this paper provides essential background context for the second phase of this study, which will provide a detailed and critical exploration of teen information-seeking behaviour for a wide range of pleasure reading materials. Phase two, currently underway, uses both quantitative and qualitative methodology to illuminate and enrich the findings from the initial survey research in an attempt to identify the unique characteristics of young teen readers and the reasons why reading and library use may begin to decline during this age range. In the qualitative component of this research, the role of reading for pleasure in the everyday lives of young teens will be investigated. In particular, the role of reading as a mechanism for self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness will be explored and the heuristic strategies used by young teens in selecting the materials they read for pleasure will be examined. Thus, this study will also provide significant insights into teens' information-seeking behaviour for pleasure reading materials.

2. Findings of Previous Studies

Most previous studies of reading habits have found that reading increases until age 10-12 and then begins to decline at age 13-14. The Canadian Opening Doors study reports that respondents in grade 4 are significantly more enthusiastic about reading than respondents in grade 7. Nieuwenhuizen's 2001 Australian study reports parallel findings: "...Enjoyment of reading for pleasure drops dramatically in teenagers, with 45% of primary students saying they really like reading for pleasure, down to 24% amongst secondary school students. None of the other pleasure activities register such a decrease in enjoyment post-puberty. Clearly, something happens to the reading experience of young people to make it seem a lot less enjoyable when they reach secondary school than it was in primary school." (19)

In all the studies of reading habits cited here, gender is found to be a significant factor in the reading habits of children and teens: from age six onward, girls read more frequently than boys, they read a greater quantity than boys, and fewer girls are non-readers. Nieuwenhuizen's 2001 study of Australian teens found that girls are more likely to see reading as easy, fun and something their friends do than are boys; in contrast, boys are more likely to see reading as boring and nerdy. (20) Similarly, the Canadian Opening Doors study finds that girls read more often and visit the public library more frequently than do boys.

Furthermore, in England, the United States, Australia and Canada, girls outperform boys in standardized tests of reading literacy. The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, Report on reading achievement of 13 and 16-year-olds in Canada noted that girls enjoy reading more than boys and are more confident readers than boys at age 13; after age 13, they continue to develop that confidence, becoming even more sure of their reading abilities by age 16. In contrast, boys appear arrested in attitude and behaviour from age 13 to 16: neither their reading skills nor their reading confidence appears to change during this period and in many boys their attitude towards reading actually deteriorates. Thus, in Canada, the gender gap in reading skills widens during the critical age from 13 to 16.

Previous studies confirm that boys and girls have different reading preferences: girls tend to prefer reading fiction while many boys prefer information books. When they read fiction, boys prefer mysteries, humour, fantasy and adventure stories. Some researchers have pointed out a dramatic contrast between school reading and recreational (or “life”) reading: in his study of grade 6-12 boys, Wilhelm found that “school reading was assigned, unconnected to their interests, too long and hard; life reading was freely chosen, built on their interests, and was usually short texts they felt competent to read.” (quoted in Cox and Collins).

Relatively few studies of reading habits have examined factors of multiculturalism or ethnicity in influencing reading habits. Those studies which have examined these factors have conflicting findings: some researchers (Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Stevenson et al, 1990) have identified a positive relationship between membership in an ethnic community and amount of reading while other studies (Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure, 2005) have found the opposite relationship.

Only a few studies have examined the impact of rural and urban locations on reading habits. The recent national survey of Reading and Buying Books for Pleasure found no correlation between reading and rural/urban setting. However, a 2002 study, Understanding the Rural-Urban Reading Gap (Cartwright and Allen, 2002) conducted for Statistics Canada found that rural children and teens read significantly less than their urban counterparts, regardless of their parents’ level of educational achievement.

3. Procedures

The preliminary study, funded by a grant from the Research Development Fund, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, ran from November 2002 to June 2003, and consisted of a mail-out survey to 500 teenagers from throughout the province of Nova Scotia. The objective of the survey was to obtain a provincial overview of current reading habits and preferences from the perspective of teenagers themselves. Using the Nova Scotia Department of Education’s projected enrolments by school board district for 2002-2003, a proportional sample of students from each school board was selected. Equal numbers of male and female and of junior high (grade 8) and high school (grade 11) students were surveyed and the sample was

stratified to ensure representation from regions and urban and rural settings.ⁱ Anonymity and confidentiality of respondents was assured.

Overall, 159 usable surveys were returned, for a response rate of 32%. Gender and grade distribution were quite evenly balanced. Unfortunately, the rural/urban distribution was quite unbalanced: only 21% of respondents were from the urban Halifax area, making it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about rural/urban differences in reading habits and public library use patterns, though some tentative trends can be very cautiously identified. A second phase of this study is currently underway which will use quantitative methodology (a survey) of 1,000 middle school students in the Halifax Regional School Board and qualitative methodology (focus groups and interviews) to investigate the significance of reading for pleasure in the lives of younger teens as well as specific information-seeking behaviour for pleasure reading materials. Phase two is designed to help redress this imbalance apparent in the first phase of the study, as Halifax Regional Municipality offers a mix of rural and urban communities and the greatest ethnic diversity in the province.

4. Findings of the initial survey

1. Teens in Nova Scotia appear to be reading more books than the amount reported for teens nationally in the 1998 GSS. 84% percent of Nova Scotia teens, in contrast with 71.4% of teens nationally, read at least a book a year for pleasure. Nova Scotia teens also appear to be avid magazine readers, although newspaper reading is declining.
2. The book reading gap between the genders appears to be widening and teenage girls in Nova Scotia read significantly more fiction books than their male counterparts. Boys are much more likely to be non-readers of fiction books than girls. This gender gap is not apparent for newspapers or magazines.
3. Teens in Nova Scotia use public libraries for research, for computer access and to borrow books. They do not visit the public library to attend programs.
4. Chain bookstores are rapidly gaining popularity with teens and are the preferred source of pleasure reading material.
5. Teens in Nova Scotia perceive themselves to be quite independent in their reading choices although friends and peers are perceived to be influential, especially by younger teens
6. Level of parental education does not seem to influence teens in the amount they read or in their genre preferences. Level of parental education does appear to influence teens' preferred sources of leisure reading materials.
7. Teens do not perceive that librarians influence their reading choices.

It is important to note that the initial study was primarily exploratory, asking a wide range of questions to a limited number of respondents in a fairly restricted geographic area. The objectives of Phase One of the study were to identify general trends in teen reading habits and public library use, and to point the way to further areas of more specific research. In particular, the initial study focused primarily upon teens' reading of fiction books; phase two of this study will address teens' nonfiction recreational reading

interests as well as their interest in magazines, graphic novels, and other formats (such as zines and online reading), topics not considered by the original study.

5. Discussion

While some of the findings of this initial study are encouraging, other results should give public librarians food for thought. Many of the findings of this study echo findings from the 1970s and early 1980s, cited earlier. However, there are some important distinctions. Even though teens in the 1970s stated that they did not perceive librarians to influence their reading choices, teens in this period relied almost exclusively upon libraries, both school and public, for their leisure reading materials. Teens did not typically report purchasing books to read for pleasure. In contrast, the 21st century teens who participated in this survey reported a strong preference for purchasing books as opposed to borrowing them from the library, making their perception of librarian influence somewhat more ominous. Although teens may not recognize the influence of librarians on their reading choices, any teen who uses the public library for leisure reading material is, of course, being influenced indirectly by book displays, book lists, and the very collection itself – all of which reflect the professional activity and selection decisions made by librarians. However, this study suggests that teens increasingly view the public library as a place to complete homework assignments and to access the Internet, but not necessarily as a source of appealing leisure reading materials, preferring to purchase their pleasure reading at chain bookstores. The preference for chain bookstores transcends gender, age, location, and parental education.

How can public libraries respond to this preference? Of particular relevance are the findings of Cook, Parker and Pettijohn's 2005 survey of 616 grade 6, 7 and 8 students in Springfield, Missouri, which noted that the overall image of the public library declined steadily with age of respondent, and stressed the importance of responding to the needs of young teens in order to encourage them to maintain the library habit throughout their teen years. Many teens in this survey had a positive attitude to the public library, although 40% rarely visited the library because they simply did not think about it. Very few teens (only 8.6%) had ever attended a teen activity or program at the library, but almost 35% reported that they would attend if they knew about upcoming events. This study noted that, from the library's perspective, "one surmountable challenge entails placing libraries in the teen market's . . . top-of-mind awareness." (161) This awareness could be achieved by reaching young teens electronically, via e-mail and compelling library websites, as well as by using teen opinion leaders to provide peer group influence. Promoting library programmes to parents was also recommended, since young teens are still "very affected by family influences." (161)

The Opening Doors study (2005) also found that lack of promotion was a major problem: pre-teen respondents were frequently unaware of library services, collections and programmes. This study advocated making the library website more engaging and youth-friendly and using the website to promote programs and services. School/library collaboration could also be enhanced to publicize these features. This study noted that their pre-teen respondents make daily use of e-mail and recommended using e-mail to

announce upcoming library programmes and events. The Opening Doors study recommends that libraries should solicit preteens' opinions about library services and collections through focus groups, an advisory board or ideas team and website surveys/polls.

Book buying, as opposed to book borrowing, appears to be the preference in Nova Scotia as elsewhere. In the United States, Bhatia (2001) reports that, according to surveys conducted in 2001, consumers under the age of 25 are buying books at three times the overall market and bookstores report a 20 to 75% jump in young buyers over the past three years. This growth in youthful consumers has had a huge impact on book publishing, making books more glamorous and celebrity-centred.

According to Hill Strategies' detailed report on book buying in Canada based on Statistics Canada's 2001 Survey of Household Spending as well as personal interviews with almost 17,000 Canadian households, in 2001, overall book spending in Canada increased by 23% from 1997 to 2001. Those in the youngest and oldest age groups spend the most on books as a percentage of total income.

Should the apparent trend towards book buying be a concern for public libraries? Several researchers have found an overall symbiosis between book borrowing and book buying: those who borrow the most also buy the most. Heavy book borrowers/buyers are also more likely to spend more time reading, to have more books at home and to have enjoyed reading as children. British researcher England (1994) reports: "Heavy buyers tend even more to be women, and to be rather younger....Library use is something people grow into after they have developed their purchasing habits. If this is true, then being a heavy buyer but a non-library user is part of a progression of interest in books." (30) The 2000 UK survey Reading the Situation also found that individuals who borrow from the public library are more likely to buy books than those who do not; thus partnerships between libraries and bookstores can potentially increase markets for both buying and borrowing.

Also of concern is the apparent gender gap in both reading and library use. Several previous researchers have examined this issue and have posited possible explanations. Hall and Coles (1999) and Millard (1997) note that the school curriculum privileges narrative fiction, which is the preferred genre for girls whereas boys prefer to read other types of materials such as comics and hobby magazines, often seen as unsuitable for school reading.

In short, many boys who self-identify as non-readers or reluctant readers may, in practice, be readers, but they read materials such as magazines, comics, or websites which they have been taught not to consider as actual reading. Parents similarly often privilege print-based reading, particularly novels, rather than electronic forms and may even limit their son's access to competing leisure pursuits such as computers and magazines.

6. Conclusion

This preliminary survey clearly demonstrates the need for a larger-scale study of teens, their reading habits, their relationship with libraries, and their information-seeking behaviour for pleasure reading materials. Further research is definitely needed to determine the specific needs and interests of teens, especially if public libraries are committed to serving the educational, informational and recreational needs of teen patrons and to retaining their patronage after they leave high school and become members of the community's adult population. What is the significance of pleasure reading in the lives of 21st century teens? How do they select their pleasure reading materials? How can the public library best serve teens' pleasure reading needs? These are all fascinating questions which will be investigated in the second phase of this ongoing research study.

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ⁱ According to the Nova Scotia Department of Education Statistical Summary 2002-2003, 12,164 students were enrolled in grade 8 in Nova Scotia and a further 12,413 were enrolled in grade 11. Thus approximately 2% of Nova Scotia students in grade 8 and 11 received the survey.