

Title: Reading practices of secondary schools teenagers

Subtitle: an approach to their understanding

Natália Maria Antunes Caseiro
School-Librarian
Escola Secundária de Domingos Sequeira - Leiria
Portugal

A dispassionate approach concerning the reading practices of secondary school teenagers is the main goal of this study, regarding a particular school library. It's based on three methodologies of observation: by collecting evidence of pupils' presence in a school library; by holding an inquiry about their reading and leisure practices and by questioning some young people's personal statements which escape a sociological and group approach. Through these supports of investigation, we can delineate a new scenery of teenager's reading practices: they read but in a different way, different from the adults' habits. The understanding of these ways of reading establishes the role of the school library in the promotion of reading styles and allows a more realistic approach to its real effects.

1st part - General framing

Purpose - The chosen title for this investigation concerns not only the matter in study, but also the purpose to understand young people's reading habits, through an observation of 16-18 year old students attending a particular secondary school. Adults usually stigmatize the reading practices and this trend has no positive contribution towards an effective role of school and libraries in young people's reading process. So the aim is to understand in order to act or just to follow their reading preferences.

Context of study – The reason for this option is, not only my involvement in a school library, but also my job as teacher of Portuguese Language and Literature, which offers a suitable context to observe the reading practices of secondary school students.

Theoretical support

The contributions of the sociology of reading must be a compulsory reference in any study about practices of reading. This perspective is present in different national and international studies which analyse reading and cultural consumptions, among the adult or the young population. In fact, the sociological perspective presents a unique help for the understanding of the reading and literacy problem. It values the mechanisms of group which operate in teenagers' options, or the factors of the identity of the youngs, or the importance of the primary socialization with reading, or the cultural, social, family, economic and geographical sources of this problem. Understanding reading as an empirical and analysing fact, the sociology of reading has improved the survey of data through objective methods, standard categories and methodological

terminology. Its conclusions underline the social origin in reading, but this question is not always completely explained, neither does it allow intervention strategies; sociological fatalism and determinism are very common.

So, it is important to analyse different perspectives and to include in this study other approaches which underline individual mechanisms of reception of the book by the reader, out of the territory of a class or group. In fact, reading reception theories will be important in this work to understand some reading behaviours, because reading is a complex and plural question not adjusted to one simple and exclusivist theory. Reading is part of the public and private dimension of any person, not only at work, but also at leisure and it regulates the access to all forms and systems of communications. Nowadays, it is indispensable to realize other forms of reading and to decode new forms of writing and communicating. The young reader selected as object of this study is at the centre of these changes. To study him as a *good or bad* reader will not help to understand him and will not make him a better user of the world of information.

Methodological support

The context of this study and the theoretical support, previously referred to, create an investigation area where one can test different methods of collecting data: on one hand, by compiling evidence of use in a school library by the targeted population in this study, during sixteen years. Certainly that, through these signs, we can note their behaviours and book preferences; they are the reading evidence in a school library. Are they enough? Only one part of the whole. On the other hand, a sample of this targeted population will be surveyed, allowing a more generic approach. Enough? Only another part of the whole. On the other hand, however, the opportunity to manage reading projects inside the classroom and inside the library stimulate the observation of individual cases and the contact with internal mechanisms of reading reception. Is this enough or yet another part of this issue?

All these elements, collected by different methodological options, will contribute to a better understanding of young people's readings choices: what do they read? Why do they read? Do they read more than previous generations? How do they read? What is the place of the book in their cultural and leisure habits?

When we pronounce this investigative process as an addition of parts to reach a whole, it seems to have an underlying and totalizing idea of truth. But there is no truth in scientific investigation, only clues of truth. Or better, speeches about reality, trying to explain it. So, conscientious of the reducing character of the language, we try to experiment different perspectives of the problem, as pieces of a mirror reflecting reality.

2nd part – Teenagers' reading habits: library evidence

2.1. Data - The observation of reading practices through evidence left by the users, during the years, in a certain school library, represents an interesting challenge for an investigator, because it gives objective and untouched data, which resist the subjectivity of looks and sensibilities. On the other hand, the nature of these signs is special, because they aren't logically prepared and conceived for an investigation. They exist because the marks of time in different places, processes and activities are inevitable. They are evidence to understand and to explore.

They can be expressed in statistics, using evidence left inside the books and places and through lost documentation. To draw some conclusions from these elements is the challenge of this particular part of this study.

2.1.1. Doc lending – This is an area of investigation with objective data, if the school library has, in a systematic way, its annual statistics reports. In the particular case of the library studied (Domingos Sequeira Secondary School in Leiria – Portugal), there are reports since 1990 and we selected a period which allows us a comparison of different kinds of doc support (book and non book material) and different kinds of lendings (home, classroom and library). So, we chose the last four years (2001/2005).

1st Evidence

2001/2005				
Lending material and types of reading				
Books and Serials				
Year	Home lending	Classroom lending	Library lending	TOTAL
2001/02	1397	1742	(not controled)	3139
2002/03	1688	1891		3579
2003/04	1932	2072		4004
2004/05	1826	2341		4167
Non Book Material (video, CD-ROM's, DVD's, CD's audio)				
Year	Home lending	Classroom and Library lending		TOTAL
2001/02	2795	1965		4760
2002/03	2796	2731		5527
2003/04	2878	2116		4994
2004/05	1001	1129		2130

Analysing this board, we can see, on one hand, much more audiovisual material than printing material during this period of four years, and, on the other hand, more stability when it comes to book loaning. This is an external view. But an internal perspective, allows us to observe that the difference between book lending and audiovisual lending will change if there are statistics of free access to books in the library.

With this evidence, we have only total numbers, but no information about the users and type of documents. To clarify these questions, we can consult the statistic option of the computer lending, introduced in 2000, but controlling only home book lending.

2nd Evidence

QUESTION	OPTIONS		
1. Number of loanings and type of users	STUDENTS 4231	TEACHERS 662	CUSTODIANTS 260
2. Number of loanings and type of books	FICTION 2943	NON FICTION 2017	REFERENCE BIBLIOGRAPHY 84

3. Number of type of books	FICTION 1943	NON FICÇÃO 3667	GENERAL BIBLIOGRAPHY 203
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Globally, this board shows us that there are more study and information books than fiction, however home lending of fiction books comes first. We can observe that, proportionally, students borrow much more books than teachers and custodians.

This is very interesting when we explore the titles of books with more home lendings, where we can observe certain kinds of books at the top: “I’m in love with a pop star” - Margarida Rebelo Pinto, “O diário da nossa paixão” – Nicholas Sparks, “Veronika decide morrer” – Paulo Coelho. If we try six Nobel authors, for instance, (Thomas Mann, Imre Kertész, James Joyce, William Golding, Tom Morrison, Harold Pinter), we have 3 books lent during 5 years; even the Portuguese Nobel author José Saramago registered 10 global lendings for 18 titles during the same period of time, against Isabel Allende with 75 and Nicholas Sparks with 152.

And what about male and female reading in our school library? Is there any evidence? Through the computer statistics, we have no answer. But through the Credit Reading Cards, which is a promoting mechanism used in the library since 2003 to stimulate reading, we have clear evidence of female teenager reading: 75% are girls’ cards and in the top ten published monthly there are, normally, 2 boys against eight girls.

2.1.2. Marks left in books by readers – Another interesting evidence of young reader in the library is the physical marks on the documentation, specially in printing material. They can be seen in several aspects: vandalism, usage, type of registered information, kind of books and lost material left inside the books.

If we take some ruined books from the shelves, we have *comprehensible* signs of usage: not only dirty pages, folded leaves, damaged backs and covers; but also leaves pulled out and cut and even missing chapters, which shows a voluntary act of vandalism. All libraries have their damaged *treasure*, just like all public spaces – they are marks of time through generations and ages. When it concerns young public, these are frequent, not only nowadays, but in the past too. We can chart the reference books of successive generations by their physical aspect: O diário de Anne Frank, O diário secreto de Adrian Mole, As sandálias do pescador by Morris West, the serial Harry Potter and several titles from Emílio Salgari, Selma Lagerlof, Alexandre Dumas, Alves Redol, Fernando Namora, Mark Twain. These book references show us both the variation of school *classics* over time, and the titles classified *for young people* launched by the publishing market. Very often, teenagers are receivers of adult determination and choices because they read what education system and publishers impose. But there are exceptions: sometimes, books, which were initially aimed at the adult market, are appropriated and abandoned to young readers, as the example of Robinson Crusoe or some titles from Pearl Buck or John Steinbeck can illustrate.

What kind of books suffer more damage? Fiction or non fiction? A quantitative approach shows that it is the latter, specially if we include lost books and books removed from the shelf; they were removed for different reasons: either because they are destroyed, because they are school manuals, because they are instruments of curricular subjects, or because the school programs change. So, the instrumental book,

used specially in the classroom and library, suffer a higher degree of consuming than the fiction book used in home lending.

In what concerns the information registered in the book, we can find: underlined sentences, topics on the edges, signatures, inappropriate comments about a teacher or the school, malicious and rude slogans and political acronyms. Sometimes, bus tickets and cheat notes are forgotten inside the book pages, but, more frequently, only library tickets. Now that the writing habits of young people have been transferred to an electronic environment, we very rarely find a personal comment on a book page.

2.2. Inference of data – On a wider perspective of analysis, the collected data characterizes, on one hand, the user, and on the other, the institution responsible by the selection of the documentation, as well as the publishing market.

What sort of young reader can we infer from the present information? What standards of reading do we have? *Light literature, Instrumental books, Trend for non book material, Female reading* are, perhaps, proper expressions to index teenage readership in a library. Then, we can conclude that the standards of use and doc consumption are situated at a low ebb. It's a legitimate inference. But, instead of analysing the problems, we are cataloguing them. And these studies need explanation to understand trends and behaviours, instead of value judgments.

When a young person chooses a book in a library, he is guided by what he needs for school and by what he finds on the shelves. A book collection in a school library reflects a complex net of situations: the school curricula, the importance of the library in the institution, the changes in the educational system, the librarians' options and the efficiency of the promoting and marketing services. In the special case of the school library in study, there is a project called *From the bookstore to the library*, where the pupils are organized in teams to go to the bookstore and choose books for the library (one pupil - two books); then, they must read and promote them at school, by organizing expositions, lectures or writing comments for the newspaper or for the electronic forum. This is a way to involve pupils in the selection of fiction books. But even then, what do they choose? They choose promotions made by the media, they consider the novelty of the author or subject, the physical aspect of the cover, the illustrations and promotional evidence; biographies, comics, fantastic stories, light novels, funny stories, real life stories, and so on; these are some of the choices made by young people. But, aren't they, nowadays, choices of adults too?

Despite these observations about reading practices through left evidence in a school library, this is only one part of the problem, because there are pupils who simply never borrow a library book; they study and read but not what the school library offers. In order to extend this study, we made a survey.

3rd part – Teenagers' reading habits: survey for questionnaire

A survey that encloses, in the same school universe, a wider school public than just the school library users, seems to be a complementary and methodological contribution to enrich the previous data. The survey was organized in four topics: Spare time habits, Reading practices, Writing practices and School library.

Characterization sample: the inquiry was applied to a sample of 60 pupils in the same grade – 11th - representing a universe of 1000 pupils.

AGE	SEX	SCHOOL PERFORMANCE Out of 20	RESIDENCE	SECONDARY COURSE
16 65%	Male 31,67%	10-12 6,67%	Urban 13,33%	Arts Course 21%
17 28,33%		13-14 36,67%		
18 5%		15-17 10%	Semi-urban 23,33%	Technological Course 26,67%
20 1,67%	Female 68,33%	18-20 3,33%		
		Repeating the grade 1,67%		
		Other situations 1,67%		

The analysis of the answers allows us to reach the following conclusions:

3.1. The connexion between the population inquired and the school library shows a low level of daily users and an instrumental use of the library for electronic and printing research, homework, dictionaries and school books lending. Reading a newspaper or a magazine in the library is more frequent than reading a book, and only a small group show fidelity through the Credit Reading Cards and other promotional activities. Although this faithful group shows more information about books and cultural interests, there are non users revealing reading practices. So we can conclude that the main purpose of a school library is not to read and that not all readers go there. There are reading practices outside the library and a non user is not necessary a non reader.

3.2. The diversity of teenagers' reading practice is connected with factors such as: their socio-cultural environment, their residence area; sex, school performance, supports of information as well as their civic and social involvement, but not in a direct way. So the *good* typical young reader is, generally, *a girl with a successful school performance*, and if we *pursue the track* of the typical *bad reader*, we normally find a boy with a bad or medium school performance, but not always *from a rural area* and from a *poor family*. The family and the geographical determinism are not compulsory factors in the reading practices. In what concerns the social involvement, it occurs indifferently, just like the use of different supports of information.

3.3. In spite of some differences, young people's reading and cultural practices have aspects of homogeneity which give them their identity. The media have a particular influence on this group identification. Their spare time options are "watching TV", "listening to music", "going to the cinema", "talking on their MSN", "reading newspapers and magazines" and their favourite films and books aren't different from the general population's. The option "talking with friends" must be included with these media spare time activities, because it is all socializing in the universe of young people. On the other hand, *in-door-activities* and particular hobbies have few followers, such as: gardening, painting, writing, collecting, going to a museum or an exhibition. In the culture of the young, what matters is socializing and their choices are within the group. When a book becomes successful among young people, there are reasons for it, either because of the media or of the society: a book adapted to a film, a best seller, a media personality, a fashion subject. The individual enjoyment is replaced by a social and collective enjoyment.

3.4. In what concerns reading practices, students also reflect a homogeneous culture, marked, on one hand, by best sellers and by school curricular fiction books, on the other hand. Besides its homogeneous character, this situation also reflects lack of diversity: for instance, comparing the list of book titles questioned in the items "last book read" and "book recommended to a friend", we can see that they aren't quite different; so youngs recommend school curricular books to friends, although they have a critical opinion about the books studied in the Portuguese classes. They criticize, but even so they suggest. Even though they dislike Portuguese, this subject *obliges* young people to read, to talk about books and their cultural references become richer. Promoting books in the Portuguese classes is, besides, an alternative to (in)form readers, specially if they discover how to read.

3.5. As far as the social representation of teenagers about readership, the population surveyed doesn't reflect special social taboos in assuming their reading habits in the community: for instance, if they pack their luggage to go on holidays, they try "to include a book, even if they don't read it"; or if they see a friend with a book, they "feel curiosity" about it. Of course that we can't conclude anything about the non special role of the book in their lives and habits, it is not a sacred hobby, but it is considered as an interest among others, but not the most important. When students were asked "What will interrupt your reading?", all answers are possible, but a "telephone call" is a good enough reason for most.

3.6. Electronic support reveals to be an usual way to read and specially to write. Writing in forums, e-mails, Messenger or mobile phone is common and it can represent a new way to promote writing practices. The population surveyed is conscious that this practice can affect a correct use of the language, but the democratization of writing through this new media can promote reading and teachers must know how to explore this medium.

These conclusions drawn from the survey, clarify some trends about today's young readers of today, but the observation and study of groups have some limitations too. Sometimes it is difficult to control the *socially correct* answer, even considering the general attitude of no veneration towards the book and printing culture. But what about the particular cases of readers? Can a survey control and explain them? You can control them, they are the *non significative number*. But to explain them ...

Level 4 / 4th part - School teenagers' reading habits: atypical cases or exceptions confirming the rule?

The project of promoting reading occurring this year in the library of the Domingos Sequeira Secondary School and my personal experience as Portuguese Language and Literature teacher have given me the opportunity to observe special cases of reading behaviour. The previous sociological trends can't explain them, because reading has particular cases of reception. Three cases:

A. A fifteen-year-old student has shown an uncommon reading profile – since September 2005, her Credit Reading Card registers 20 books, some quite difficult to read. Her father is worried and the school psychologist has catalogued her as an obsessive case of reading. Now she is taking pills, which make her feel drowsy, but she seems very normal and awake when she talks about books.

B. Another student, sixteen-years-old, shows an unusual capacity to read and write about his readings, not only in the reading reports but also in the electronic forum about books, films and music, organized by the school library. But in the classroom, in conversation, he is completely different: he is against books, reading and the teacher. A young rebel? A double character?

C. Ann is an eighteen year old girl with an irregular school performance, but she reads a lot and she takes part in all the reading activities in the library. Her reading practice has no contribution to her writing abilities and study methods. Why?

Three cases that escape from a group and a social approach and await analysis and understanding.

In the first case, the girl has directed her obsessive propensity towards books, but she could have done it otherwise, towards another focus or interest, such as music, sport or films. And, in that case, she would have had a worse performance on reading and she could be considered a *bad reader* but a good *sportsgirl* or a *fanatic spectator or music listener*. Perhaps her focus on books is just occasional and not the product of a solid process. Anyway, the most important factor is that the book can and should be a developing factor in her personal maturity, promoting her social integration with friends and in class. By the way, we have organized a reading meeting in which this specific girl informed her class about the books she had chosen for the project *From the Bookstore to the Library*; this initiative took place in the school library and it was a very special moment.

Case B - the relationship with books is also a singular one, because it reveals a behaviour of double personality towards books: on one hand, the boy shows writing and reading profiles which make him an efficient reader; but, on the other hand, he tends to hide these capacities in group, revealing a rebellious attitude towards books and culture. This is a typical and emblematic boys' behaviour, owing to several reasons, including their late process of maturity comparing with girls'. The adult must understand this type of behaviour and avoid reacting emotionally. Only time does solve this problem.

The last case, C, can be considered the counterpoint of B, because, instead of rebellion, there is politeness, and instead of efficient writing and reading profile, there are a lot of handicaps in what concerns school performance.

In all the cases, there is a question of attitude towards the book and reading, which proves that the psychology of reading is also very important to understand reading practices.

Conclusions

When adults analyse teenagers' reading practices, they tend to use a generational speech, confronting their generation with youngs' generation, and they also tend to identify their practices to low standards of quality and the overuse of the electronic reading screen. What is truth in this point of view? This question must be examined on both perspectives of young and adults.

Regarding youth, there are, in fact, a lot of changes in their attitude towards the books: their reading is much more plural and diversified in material and types of documentation; their book choice reveals standards of a massified culture; and their comments about books are direct and not elaborated. But, aren't these the generic characteristics of the present reader, whatever is his age? If we examine the studies of national and European surveys (see references nº 2, 4, 5), they do confirm the same type of reader. This new way of reading reflects the reading on the computer board and it is shown on fiction and non fiction books: the story must be strong and dynamic and the information must be illustrated, with *hiperlinks*, with evidence and not with complex, descriptive and abstract data. These new audiences need to decode and fully digest the message. A new code of reading and writing seems to have seen born in modern society with these new readers.

Adults must understand this new way of reading and can not demand elaborated and erudite approaches such as: *second reading*, *intertextual reading*, *problematic reading*, *eclectic reading*, *thematic reading*, *author reading* – these ones are specific on adult readings, and only possible with years of trained reading habits, with high doses of concentration, an exercise of intellectual pleasure and the experience of life and aging. These are not definitely attributes of the young people, qualities that only time and age can maturate. Besides, social stigmatization on reading means social exclusion. And young generation can not grow without information, books and knowledge. And school libraries are here to help this process.

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Biographical Note

Natália Maria Antunes Caseiro was born in 1954 in Leiria (Portugal), where she also lives and works. She is a teacher of Portuguese Language and Literature and school-librarian at “Domingos Sequeira” Secondary School (Leiria), since 1988. In what concerns Reading and Librarianship, she has organized several projects and training courses. She is member of the Portuguese Association of Librarians, Archivists and Documentalists and she has written the book “Os devoradores de livros”, published in 1998.

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