

# **“I Hate to Read-Or Do I?” Low-Achievers and Their Reading**

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*Phase 2 of the Barnstable Study of a web-based summer reading program focuses on low-achieving students who had a low participation rate in the first two years of the program. The researchers interviewed and surveyed seventy students who formed seven focus groups. This study challenges assumptions about struggling readers. Do struggling readers consider themselves readers outside of school, where they have choices that relate to what they like to do? Do they read? What do they read? Do they really hate to read? Gender and grade level emerged as factors in participation rates in the program. Student responses emphasized the importance of relevance of reading materials to reading preferences. Low achievers had a strong preference for alternative reading materials.*

*Low-achievers Adolescent reading behavior Young adult reading interests*

## **Introduction**

Who are the adolescents who say they hate to read? The literature says they have low intelligence and low reading levels (Hoskyn & Swanson, 2000, p. 102). “Traditionally, the struggling reader has been viewed as a low achiever.” (Guthrie & Davis, 2003, p. 60). She is seen as lacking the defining attributes of the struggling reader: poor reading comprehension, study skills, word recognition, and reading fluency (Vacca & Vacca, 1999), who presents an unmotivated, disinterested affect to school and school work. Students who say they hate to read are not likely to believe or have confidence that they can read (Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998). Self-efficacy is the student’s belief that he can succeed. Students who have low self-efficacy in reading believe that they cannot read even if they work hard (Zimmerman, 2000). Struggling readers resist reading or are apathetic about it. (McCabe & Margolis, 2001). It is tempting to reach the conclusion, as some researchers have, that the struggling reader “... is disengaged from literacy (Moge, et al., 2000).

This study challenges assumptions about struggling readers. Do struggling readers consider themselves readers outside of school, where they have choices that relate to what they like to do? Do they read? What do they read? Do they really hate to read? A report from the National Endowment for the Arts (2007) extends the investigation of reading trends from

exclusively focusing on literary reading to include a variety of reading, including fiction and non-fiction genres published as books, magazines, newspapers, and online reading. Despite the inclusion of non-traditional reading formats, the report cites a downward trend in reading among secondary-aged students since 1992: 1) Less than one-third of 13-year-olds are daily readers; 2) 15- to 24-year-olds spend only 7-10 minutes per day on voluntary reading, which is about 60 percent less time than the average American. (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). The percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled over a 20-year period. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). The report noted that the percentage of thirteen and seventeen year-olds who said they read for fun almost every day was lower in 2004 than in 1984. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). There was also an increase over the same period of time in the percentage who said they never or hardly ever read for fun. For all three ages, "...reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement." (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, p. 12). Students who said they read for pleasure on a daily or weekly basis score better on reading and writing tests than infrequent readers (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

There is abundant evidence that reading for pleasure, or Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) (Krashen, 2004) reaps benefits to the reader that equal or exceed direct instruction in reading remediation. A meta-analysis compared studies of in-school free reading with traditional, direct instruction approaches to reading remediation. "In 51 out of 54 studies, students using FVR did as well or better on reading tests than students given traditional skill-based reading instruction (Krashen, 2004, pp. 2-3). Several studies have focused on free voluntary reading and low achievers. McNeil, in Fader, (1976) examined the effects of a free reading program on 60 reform school boys, ages 12-17, who were encouraged to read newspapers, magazines, and paperback books. Reading was followed up by class discussion. After one year, the boys' reading comprehension scores increased from 69.9 to 82.7, or 12.8 points, while the comparison group made a gain of 4.6 points. Shinn (2001) examined the effect of a six-week self-selected reading experience among 200 sixth grade low achievers who attended summer school because of low reading proficiency. About 30 percent of each group were limited English proficient as well. Of the four hours per day of classes, two hours were devoted to self-selected reading, including 25 minutes in the school library. In addition, for about 45 minutes per day students read young adult novels. The comparison group followed a standard language arts curriculum. The readers gained approximately five months on the Altos test of reading comprehension and vocabulary over the six weeks, while the comparison groups' comprehension declined. On the Nelson-Denny reading comprehension test, the summer readers raised their comprehension scores by a whole year or more. Studies also show a relationship between amounts read and spelling performance (Stanovich & West, 1989; Polak & Krashen, 1988) and a positive relationship between reading and writing ability (Lee & Krashen, 1997; Lee, 2001).

In light of this evidence it is significant that there is, "A downward trend in voluntary reading by youth at the middle and high school levels over the past two decades" that clearly signals that something other than reading for fun is occupying their time." (Alverman et al, 2007, p. 34). That something may well be emerging literacies based in digital technologies. "What counts as literacy-and how literacy is practiced-are now in historical transition, and young people...are at the vanguard of the creation of new cultural forms" (Hull & Zucker, 2004, p. 42). "How do youth who are underachievers and who struggle when reading school-assigned textbooks engage with popular culture of their own choosing (e.g., magazines, comics, TV, video games, music, CDs, graffiti, e-mail, and other Internet-mediated texts)?"

(Alverman, et al, 2007, p.36). There is little in the literature about the personal and everyday literacies of adolescents (Alvermann, Fitzgerald & Simpson, 2006), despite the attention given to the potential of these literacies for engaging adolescents with reading (Alvermann, Huddleston, & Hagood, 2004; Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). Do struggling readers hate to read? What are their attitudes and every day information behaviors?

### **Reading Takes You Places, Summer 2006**

This study is the second phase of a study (Lu & Gordon, 2007) that examined the effects of a web-based summer reading program on adolescents' reading interests, attitudes and behaviors. The site for both phases of the study was Barnstable High School (BHS), located in Hyannis, Massachusetts, sixty miles east of Boston. The population of the town is 40,949. The median household income is \$46,811, higher than the national median of \$41,994 (U. S. Census Bureau 2000). BHS serves 2,000 students; 92 percent of the population is white. The largest minorities include African Americans (almost 3 percent) and Hispanic/Latinos (almost 2 percent). The school's mission statement encourages "...traditional and innovative methods to engage the different learning styles of our students. We will prepare graduates to take responsibility for their own learning." (Barnstable High School Program of Studies 2004, p. 3) The school is administered by a principal, an assistant principal, and five housemasters, who oversee the daily operations of five self-contained houses. There are three ability groupings of students within each house: low achievers who tend to be reluctant readers with low reading and standardized test scores; average achievers; and Honor students. The BHS library strives to be an integral part of teaching and learning, and its mission is to play an active role in instruction through strong collaborations between the school librarian and classroom teachers.

The web-based summer reading program was designed by a committee that included five English teachers and the school librarian. The charge of the committee was to revise the summer reading lists for each grade level. The committee decided to shift their thinking to conceptualizing a summer reading program and agreed-upon, research-based guidelines: People who say they read more read better (Krashen, 2004), therefore the primary purpose of the program is to encourage students to read more. The following research findings informed the design of the original summer reading program and continues to inform revision of the website.

1. The program offers students choice because choice is an important element in reading engagement (Schraw et al. 1998). This includes the choice to pursue personal reading interests. To this end, the school librarian administered a survey to students to collect their recommendations for book titles. Staff recommendations are collected through e-mail. Student projects accommodate multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and thinking styles (Sternberg, 1997) as well as options for written work.

2. Because "... results suggest that schools can encourage children to read more by also requiring them to complete a short writing activity based on their summer reading activities ... ." and that "students who fulfilled teacher requirements by writing about their summer book ... are predicted to read more books than their classmates who did not complete these activities," (Kim, 2004, p.185) reading responses include writing activities. Reading response projects reflect activities students enjoy in their leisure time are grounded in reading response described as the aesthetic stance in transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978).

3. The summer reading program is web-based because "virtually all Net Gen students were using computers by the time they were 16 to 18 years of age ... Among children ages 8 to 18, 96 percent have gone online. Seventy-four percent have access at home, and 61 percent use the Internet on a typical day." (Jones, 2002)

4. In a study that altered text instructions in an assignment to a graphic layout, there were fewer refusals to do the assignment and post-test score increased (Prensky, 2001). Because the net generation is not only attracted to image-rich environments, but is more comfortable with them, the web site is visually attractive with lots of colorful graphics.

5. In order to encourage students to read more, the primary purpose of summer reading is reading for fun rather than for academic purposes.

The results of the first phase of the study in Fall 2006 (Lu & Gordon 2007) showed that while average and Honor students had a high participation rate in the web-based summer reading program, low achievers had a poor rate of participation. Nor were they well represented in the survey used to collect data. When low achievers did respond, there were negative references to reading. The researchers returned to the research site after the second administration of the web-based summer reading program in the Summer, 2007 to study low achievers' reading interests, attitudes and behaviors.

### **Flop Down and Flip the Pages, Summer 2007**

The second edition of the summer reading program, *Flop Down and Flip the Pages*, can be seen at <http://www.barnstable.k12.ma.us/bhs/Library/SummerReadingProgram.htm>. (This is a working web site that undergoes revision each spring.) There are thirteen book lists; some are genre-centered, but modified for broader appeal. For example, science fiction includes time travel and fantasy. Each title recommended by student or staff is tagged with a "thumbs up" icon. Because the school has a Brazilian population of students whose first language is Portuguese, titles by Brazilian authors are included in as many lists as possible to encourage these students to read in Portuguese as well as English, since primary language plays a significant role in the intellectual growth of bi- and multi-lingual children (Cummins, 1981).

The reading lists are designed to mimic commercial web pages, such as amazon.com, with an annotated featured title and image at the top of each page. A link to NoveList directs students to find "more books like this one." Another feature, Get Books, leads students to links to the catalogs of the school library and regional public library collaborative network. There are also links to Borders and Barnes & Noble web sites where students can purchase books.

The last section of the website is called "Reading Reponses." Students choose activities from 15 Novel Ideas that mimic what they like to do in their daily lives, such as talking on the phone and surfing the web. Other choices include blogging, an exercise called "How to Judge a Book by its Cover," and joining summer reading in the college they are considering.

### **The Study**

### *Demographics of the sample*

The sample consisted of 70 low-achieving students from grades nine through twelve. The unit of selection was English classes, grades nine through twelve, which are homogeneously group by ability. This ensures that all student participants are low achievers. The sample of 70 low-achieving students was randomly selected from English teachers who were willing to participate in the study. Of 70 low-achieving participants, 37 were male, and 33 were female. There were 25 grade-nine students, 20 grade-ten, 22 grade eleven, and three grade twelve students. 41 percent of students (29 out of 70) reported they participated in the school summer reading program. Participants by grade level were: 8 from grade nine, 7 from grade ten, 12 from grade eleven, and 2 from grade twelve. There were 19 female students and 10 male. Analysis showed that female students have a higher participation rate than male students (58 percent to 27 percent). Also, grade twelve and grade eleven students had comparatively higher participating rate (66 percent and 55 percent) than grade ten and grade nine respondents (35 percent and 32 percent, respectively).

### *Data Collection*

The researchers conducted seven homogeneous focus groups consisting of students from grades nine through twelve. In these sessions students explored their views and attitudes about reading. Each student responded to a survey following the focus group discussions, which were 15 to 20 minutes in length. Close-ended questions gathered information such as age, gender, and grade level. Half of the questions were open-ended to encourage students' direct and honest response about their reading behaviors and attitudes. Survey items focused on respondents' book selections, reading achievements, attitudes towards reading, and reading experiences via alternative media such as newspapers, magazines, and websites.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Participation in the web-based summer reading program*

Fifty-nine percent of the low-achieving students in the sample (N=70) did not participate in the summer reading program. Most non-participants said they simply did not like reading and they did not read. No participants complained about computer and Internet access. Access, or lack of access, to computers and the Internet was not perceived as a major barrier to participating in this web-based reading program. The result that male students have a higher non-participating rate than girls (72 percent to 42 percent) is consistent with studies that acknowledge the significance of gender in reading activities. Additionally, grade level seems to be an indicator of low-achieving students' reading behavior: the higher grade level, the better the participation. This may have been that some grade nine respondents were not aware of this summer reading program when they transitioned from middle schools to high schools, although as outgoing grade 8 students they did receive information about the web-based summer reading program. It may also be explained by the fact that there were only 2 grade twelve, low-achieving students in this study, compared with more than 20 students from each of other grade levels.

### *Amount of books read*

Students were asked to read three books during summer and complete a project for each book in the Fall. A total of 57 books were reported read in summer by 27 low-achieving students, with two other students reporting “reading a lot.” The mean was 2.1 books per participating student, which was nearly one book more than the mean measured the previous year in the same school (Lu & Gordon, 2007). Unlike the previous year, there was not a significant gender difference in the amount of books read. On average, female students read only slightly more books than males (2.2 books to 1.8 books). Nor was grade level significant in terms of the number of books read. The ratio across the four grades was 1.8 to 2.6 to 2.1 to 2.0 books.

### *Reading interests*

Two variables were used to examine students’ reading interests: their self-reported interests and their reported reading behaviours, including the book lists students chose to browse.

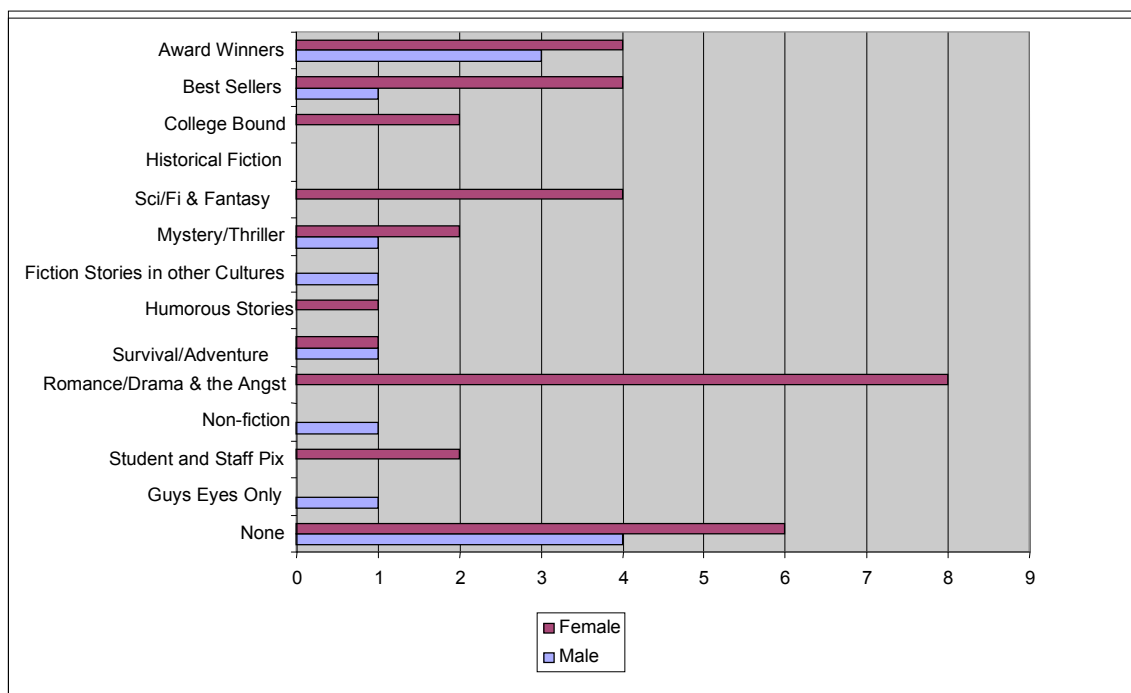
During the focus group discussions students emphasized the importance of “being able to relate to” what they read. These students liked “something true and exciting,” “things about real people,” “stories about current modern teenager life,” and “[books] about everyday life,” to name a few. They did not like “things that are not real [referring to fantasy and science fiction],” “books that drag on [referring to length],” and “books that are too wordy [referring to long descriptions].” Not surprisingly, these low-achieving students did not like *Harry Potter*, a high interest book among most teens, which had each of the negative elements they mentioned. Only four of the teens had read one or two books of the *Harry Potter* series. None read more than three books in the series. Another high interest genre among teenagers, manga, or comic books, did not work with these low-achieving students either. Only one of them had read manga or comic books. Many of them were not familiar with the word “manga.”

The survey findings were consistent with the results of the focus group discussions. Regarding the books they read in summer, respondents reported 44 titles used for reading projects. Six of the titles were not included in this analysis because of illegible handwriting, incomplete or incorrect titles, or respondents’ inability to recall titles. Thirty-eight books were then classified into three categories: Realistic fiction (70.5 percent), fantasy and science fiction (16 percent), as well as non-fiction, including autobiography and biography titles (13.5 percent). The significant difference between realistic fiction and the other two categories among low-achieving students is not surprising considering their preference for real-life characters and themes. Even the non-fiction books they read (i.e., *A Child Called It* by Dave Pelzer, its sequel *The Lost Boy*, and *Juiced* by Jose Canseco) had similar humane characteristics and strong narratives.

The students’ reading interests were reflected by the book lists they chose to browse. The summer reading program provided 13 book lists for the students. Among those low achievers who participated (n=29), 66 percent of the students (19 out of 29) browsed the lists. The top three lists browsed most frequently were, *The Romance, the Drama & the Angst*, (which contains popular titles about romance, love, and relationships), *Award and Honor Winners*, (which offers a variety of young adult award-winning titles by popular authors), and *Run with a Winner: Best Sellers*, which includes titles from bestseller lists of contemporary, realistic novels from the *New York Times* bestseller lists.

Were there any gender differences in terms of reading preferences and interests? Results of this study do reveal some differences, but unfortunately, the sample size—only 29 summer reading participants—was too small for statistical analysis. There are, however, some interesting gender-related findings worthy of further observation. (Figure 1) For example, the most popular list, *The Romance, the Drama & the Angst*, was browsed exclusively by females. In contrast, the list dedicated solely to boys, *Guys Eyes Only*, was visited by one male low-achieving student. The popularity of the romance/drama/angst list among female students points out that girls were interested in this category and were willing to explore and browse the list. It indicates that this list is meeting the female readers' needs. Male students, however, did not show a penchant for any specific categories. Since only one boy browsed the *Guys Eyes Only* list, it is difficult to gauge their attitude towards this category. Perhaps they did not have interest in this specific category, or they did not see this list because they would have to scroll to the bottom of the web page to find it. Perhaps they chose not to browse because "I know what I want to read," as one male student commented.

**Figure 1: Book Lists Browsed by Gender**



The most important factors affecting participants' book selection were illustration and cover (28 percent), subject (21 percent), length (21 percent), and recommendation by a friend (21 percent). Random selection was reported by 21 percent of respondents.

### ***Alternative Reading***

One question posed to all low-achieving participants and non-participants of summer reading was whether they read any of the following materials during the past summer: A newspaper article, a magazine, a website or anything on the Internet, sports news, and/or a comic or manga book. The purpose of this question was to explore whether low-achieving students read alternative media. Low achievers reported that they read newspaper articles (60 percent), magazines (60 percent), websites (71 percent), sports news (34 percent), and comic/manga books (11 percent). Only 7 out of the 70 low-achieving students (10 percent)

reported that they did not read materials in any of these formats. This indicates that these low-achieving students, who said they hated to read, were actually engaged in reading media other than books.

A comparative analysis of alternative reading between summer reading participants and non-participants did not yield significant differences (Table 1). Differences ranged from 2 percent to 10 percent, in 4 out of the 5 the alternative media categories. The only major difference (19 percent) emerged in comparing newspaper reading between participants and non-participants. The cause of this difference is uncertain. Perhaps students who participated in summer reading (i.e., book reading) were more comfortable with reading newspaper articles, which are usually text-loaded.

**Table 1: Alternative Reading by Summer Reading Participants and Non-Participants**

	Participant (N=29)		Non-Participant (N=41)	
newspaper article	20	69%	21	51%
magazine	19	66%	23	56%
website	21	72%	29	70%
sports news	12	41%	13	32%
comic/manga	3	10%	5	12%

Two categories yielded substantial gender differences: magazine and sports news (Table 2). The biggest gender difference in alternative reading appeared in the category of “sports news.” While 21 male students (57 percent) read sports news, only 4 female students (12 percent) did so. The popularity of sports news among boys indicates that this is probably a category or subject that is comparable to romance/drama/angst for girls. The second biggest difference came from magazine reading: 49 percent boys read magazines as compared with 73 percent of girls.

**Table 2: Alternative Reading by Gender**

	Male (N=37)		Female (N=33)	
newspaper article	20	54%	21	64%
magazine	18	49%	24	73%
website	24	65%	26	79%
sports news	21	57%	4	12%
comic/manga	4	11%	4	12%

## *Reading Achievements*



Students reported a variety of rewarding benefits from reading, ranging from technical components, such as grammar, to content, such as “information about other people,” to psychological and social components such as “dealing with discrimination.” It is noticeable that among all the reading benefits these students mentioned, a majority of them were associated with dealing with personal challenges such as “depression,” “friendship issues,” or “relationship problems.” Only three students mentioned “knowledge,” “sports news,” and “information about other people.” Two students pointed out “vocabulary” and “grammar” as their reading benefits. The overwhelming importance of learning life lessons identified by the students is not surprising, given that this group of students showed a strong preference for contemporary realistic fiction, which typically addresses a variety of social issues.

### **Implications for Further Study**

Emerging from these findings is a snapshot of low-achieving students’ reading interests, reading behaviors, and their perceptions of the benefits associated with reading. The findings point to more differentiation in service provision, outcome measurement, and accessibility of reading media to meet the diverse needs of low-achieving students.

The findings reveal that low-achieving students favor stories that have a realistic and humane touch. For many of them, such stories seem to function as a tool for developing, or even molding, individual behavior and personality, as evidenced by their testimonies in the previous section that describe their perceptions of the benefits derived from reading. They seem to acknowledge that realistic stories and believable characters contribute to their personal growth by helping them tackle life’s challenges. This is consistent with contemporary folklore research suggesting that stories play a significant role in “stimulating the intellectual, spiritual, and psychological development of human beings” (King, 1992, p.1). However, the evaluation of reading benefits in schools has rarely looked at these social and psychological elements.

The measurement of reading outcomes has been quantity-driven for decades. We measure the amount of books students read and we use standardized tests to evaluate how well students read. However, books are not the only reading medium, and standardized reading tests can not reveal the private and personal learning experiences identified by low-achieving students. Reading offers them life lessons and new insights into personal challenges. Although evaluation of these personal aspects can be difficult and subjective, we should acknowledge that individuals may benefit from reading in different ways. This points to the need to provide materials and structures that help students grow, not only cognitively, but psychologically, emotionally, and socially, through their reading experiences. These benefits of reading may be more critical to the well-being of low-achieving students than is obvious, especially when they tell us how much they hate reading.

This study has implications for further research that addresses 21<sup>st</sup> century reading and learning. One of the most important international definitions of reading literacy comes from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey administered by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development that surveyed 265,000 students from 32 countries. Their results found that reading literacy is no longer considered to be simply the ability to read and write. Today, “reading literacy is understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD, 2003, p. 108). This definition looks at how

well students can use written materials to meet the challenges of the real world and to become lifelong learners. This definition also echoes our findings about the reading behaviors of low-achieving students in dealing with life lessons through reading. Low-achievers are well-aware of their need to live vicariously through story. As we develop a perspective on reading that goes beyond standardized tests, a new theoretical framework to encompass different reading competencies appears to be needed. An improved pedagogy should address the affective dimension of reading as well as reading for comprehension. The resistance of parents and educators to see adolescents as something more than students who happen to be taller and older than children obscures the importance of their adolescent needs to relate to the stories for which text is the delivery mechanism. Rigidity about what students should read, compounded by an institutional insistence on accountability for “voluntary” reading, actually creates barriers to motivating student to read. The problem of low reading scores and declining reading for pleasure may be one of aliteracy, rather than illiteracy. Is a monolithic, institutionalized approach to free voluntary reading in schools actually discouraging low-achieving adolescents, rather than encouraging them to read?

It is significant that low-achieving students are reading alternative media. While most of them saw book reading as “boring,” “waste of time,” “too wordy,” and “a headache,” they enthusiastically engaged with reading other formats, such as newspaper articles, magazines, and websites. This finding has strong implications for school library professionals in designing and evaluating our services to students. The library collection should reflect this reading trend. Circulation policies that offer only books to struggling readers are obstructive and need to change to include alternative media. The design of reading services such as summer reading, an important component of school library services, should include alternative media. In addition to book lists, the school library can provide magazine lists, article clippings, and webliographies that contain high interest websites that address students’ diverse needs.

The strong rationale for reading alternative media must continue to drive rigorous research to develop multiple models of reading approaches for all students, but particularly for struggling readers. To this end, research-based reading practices are critical to successfully addressing questions raised by this study. Findings about the importance of the social, psychological, and emotion elements, as well as the academic benefits, of reading to the well-being of adolescents invite further research that examines literacy from a more holistic perspective.

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### **Statement of Originality**

This statement certifies that the paper above is based upon original research undertaken by the author and that the paper was conceived and written by the author(s) alone and has not been published elsewhere. All information and ideas from others is referenced.