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# Rural Teenagers Are Reading!

## A Study of the Leisure Reading Patterns of Rural Ninth Grade Students

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*In 1984, NCASL created a special committee whose purpose was to acknowledge library media coordinators' skills and expertise while responding to their interests in pursuing new ideas and projects. The committee now grants financial awards annually in support of its memberships' research projects that provide for professional growth, improve media program effectiveness, and enhance student learning. The research grant discussed in the following article was awarded in October, 1985. This is the second in a series of articles published in **North Carolina Libraries** reporting the research findings of grant recipients.*

*Applications for the 1987 grants are available from Beth Rountree, Thompson Staff Development Center, 428 West Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28203.*

**Beth Rountree**, Chairman  
NCASL Research Grants Committee

There is evidence among librarians of increasing interest in services to young adults: lists of recommended materials, books on young adult services, state standards for public and school libraries, and research studies on relevant aspects of adolescence are appearing more and more frequently in the literature of librarianship. A major concern consistently reflected in these writings is whether our teenagers, raised on television, carrying their music with them in boom boxes or walkmans, and wrapped up in the complexities of adolescence, will ever become reading adults. To examine the facts behind this concern, a study was designed to explore the leisure reading patterns of young adults. Since our area of concern is eastern North Carolina, a predominantly rural area, we were particularly interested in rural teenagers, whose leisure reading patterns, we suspected, differed greatly from those of urban teenagers. Due to the distance between home and libraries (public and school), reading material would be less readily available for the rural teen-

ager; however, there might be more leisure time to be filled since the amusements and other distractions of a large city would be missing.

### The Setting

Our study was conducted in two rural high schools well-matched in all aspects but one: proximity to a large city. While one school is located in a sparsely populated coastal area, the other is less than thirty-five miles from one of the state's larger cities. The high schools are centrally located to the areas they serve and include grades nine through twelve. The populations of both schools are similar with over 90% of the student enrollment classified as rural. Ethnic distribution is approximately equal, black and white, with no other groups represented. Between one-third and one-half of the families have incomes at or below the poverty level with most of them in agricultural occupations and with little formal education beyond high school.

Students at both schools are grouped for certain classes and courses of study. Five groups are used: Academically Gifted, College Preparatory, General, Chapter I, and Special Education. Academically Gifted students are identified by state guidelines, which include intelligence and standardized achievement test scores and grade point average. College Preparatory students, those planning to attend college, and General students, those with no further academic plans, are determined by student choice. Special Education students, also determined by state guidelines, are those with limitations which may include physical, mental, or behavioral. Chapter I students are determined differently at the two high schools. One defines them by reading scores below the fiftieth percentile on the California Achievement Test while the other identifies them using three criteria: C.A.T. scores below the forty-fifth percentile; teacher recommendation, and performance in school.

### The Study

#### Data Collection

A five-page, 28-item, questionnaire was devised, focusing on factors related to reading by

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choice: whether or not teenagers read in their leisure time; if they do read, what and where they read and how they obtain their reading material; if they do not read, why not. The questionnaire is a modified checklist with space provided for comments and includes several open-ended questions. Ninth grade students were selected for preliminary study, since they fall into the category described by G. Robert Carlsen in *Books and the Teenage Reader* as "middle adolescence." Questionnaires were duplicated in five colors for easy identification of the five groups described above and were administered to 20 English classes, 10 at each school, by their classroom teachers. A total of 362 questionnaires were collected, with group distribution as shown in Table I.

TABLE I. Breakdown of Respondents by Group.

Profile of Respondents (N = 362)				
Gifted	College Prep	General	Chapter I	Special Ed
22 (6%)	156 (43%)	72 (20%)	76 (21%)	32 (9%)

Data were analyzed to determine what percentage of respondents, both overall and by groups, claimed to read or not to read in their spare time. For non-readers, reasons given for not reading were examined. For readers, factors were analyzed relating to types of reading material chosen for leisure reading, where reading material was obtained, what types of reading materials teenagers purchased, and where and when teenagers read for pleasure.

Data Analysis

A surprising 296 of our 362 respondents (82%) answered "yes" to the question, "Do you ever read in your spare time." By sex, 72% of the males surveyed and 92% of the females surveyed chose reading as a leisure activity. Analysis by group was even more surprising. It was anticipated that the Gifted and College Preparatory groups would have a high percentage of spare time readers, and they did: 100% of the Gifted group and 82% of the College Preparatory group responded "yes." However, 70% or more of the General and Chapter I respondents also indicated that they read in their spare time. (Table II shows a breakdown by group.)

TABLE II. By-Group Responses, "Do You Ever Read in Your Spare Time?"

	College				
	Gifted	Prep	General	Chap. I	Sp. Ed.
Total % "Yes"	100%	90%	77%	75%	59%
% Females "Yes"	100%	95%	86%	86%	79%
% Males "Yes"	100%	82%	72%	70%	45%

Less than 20% of the total respondents claimed they did not read in their spare time. As might be anticipated, none of the Gifted, and only 10% of the College Preparatory students were included in this group. Twenty-five per cent or less of the General and Chapter I students indicated no leisure reading activity, as opposed to forty per cent of the Special Education students. A breakdown by sex indicated that twice as many males as females in each group claimed that they did not read in their spare time. The two most frequent responses checked by non-readers for not reading (over fifty per cent) were working after school and hating to read. In addition, 75% of the General students who claimed not to read in their spare time checked the response, "reading is too hard." Other reasons given for not reading included, "too much on my mind," "too much to do," and "bothers my eyes."

On questions relating to materials chosen for leisure reading, a difference was observed between the responses of males and females. For males, the top three categories of reading materials across groups were magazines (72%), sports/sports biographies (68%), and comic books (54%). It is interesting to note that only 29% of the female respondents read comic books. For females, the top three categories were romance (90%), mystery (73%), and magazines (73%). Specific magazines favored by boys included *Hot Rod*, *Field and Stream*, and *Sports Illustrated*. Girls favored *Teen*, *Seventeen*, *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Young Miss*. Twenty-two per cent of each group, male and female, claimed to read non-fiction with boys specifying books on sports, hunting, and war while girls chose biographies. (For a specific breakdown of preferred materials across groups, see Tables III & IV.)

TABLE III. Preferred Reading Material of Girls by Group

	College				
	Gifted	Prep	General	Chap. I	Sp. Ed.
Romance	95%	90%	92%	100%	55%
Mystery	84%	76%	83%	58%	36%
Magazines	84%	74%	83%	58%	46%
Science Fiction	42%	32%	17%	11%	0%

TABLE IV. Preferred Reading Material of Boys by Group

	College				
	Gifted	Prep	General	Chap. I	Sp. Ed.
Magazines	67%	70%	67%	66%	89%
Sports/Sp. Bio.	33%	52%	48%	100%	100%
Comic Books	33%	54%	45%	55%	78%
Science Fiction	100%	63%	51%	26%	22%

An interesting contrast in choice of leisure material is provided by science fiction. While forty

per cent or more of students in the Gifted, College Preparatory, and General groups claim to read science fiction, 20% or less of the Chapter I and Special Education students selected it. Among those who read science fiction, twice as many are males as opposed to females.

The primary source of reading material is the school library. Almost 90% of the students, male and female, checked the school library in response to the question, "Where do you get the things you read?" Girls borrow books from friends (71%) more readily than do boys (48%), while boys appear to read the magazines in their homes (71%) somewhat more often than do girls (63%). More girls than boys use the public library (66% as opposed to 41%). An equal percentage (68%) of males and females read the books in their homes and over half of them buy books at grocery, drug, and discount stores. The major contrast across groups appears to be in the use of the public library. Eighty-two per cent of the Gifted and 59% of the College Preparatory students use the public library while less than half of the remaining groups do. (For a breakdown of library use across groups, see Table V.)

TABLE V. Libraries As Sources of Leisure Reading Materials

Group	School Library	Public Library
Gifted	82%	82%
College Prep	79%	59%
General	75%	46%
Chapter I	100%	47%
Special Education	100%	40%

In opposition to the image of the teenager as a non-reader is the fact that 83% of both male and female respondents who read in their leisure time spend their own money on reading material. Seventy-four per cent of the boys buy magazines, their top choice for purchased reading materials, while nearly seventy per cent of the girls surveyed buy both paperbacks and magazines. Across groups, the Gifted buy the most paperback books (77%) and the fewest comics (5%). The greatest percentage of comics (37%) is purchased by the General students, while Special Education students buy the most newspapers. (For a by-group breakdown, see Table VI). Most of the respondents who spent their own money on reading material indicated that their purchases were of the types listed above. A few respondents, however, indicated that they also spent money on hardcover and on book club books.

The final factors of interest to this study were where and when leisure reading occurred. Across categories, most leisure reading occurred in the

home (78% of the males and 94% of the females), usually taking place in the bedroom or living room. Slightly more than half the respondents, both males and females, indicated that they also read for pleasure during school. Approximately half of the girls and a fourth of the boys also read on the school bus. Males read mostly on weeknights (89%) while females frequently read both weeknights (97%) and weekends (84%). Summer vacations were less popular leisure reading times for boys (36%); however, girls continue to read for pleasure during the summer (85%).

TABLE VI. By-Group Percentage of Types of Reading Materials Purchased

	College				
	Gifted	Prep	General	Chap. I	Sp. Ed.
Magazines	50%	79%	77%	61%	45%
Paperback Books	77%	59%	47%	40%	20%
Comic Books	5%	21%	37%	33%	25%
Newspapers	5%	11%	14%	23%	15%

Implications for Practice

Three findings from this study are particularly significant to the practice of young adult librarianship.

First, the most surprising, and most hopeful, finding of our study is that teenagers are reading in their leisure time! Moreover, the high percentage of those who enjoy reading is not limited to the college bound; even among the Chapter I students, those identified by low reading scores, 75% chose reading as a leisure activity. However, comments and responses to open-ended questions indicate that teenagers consider "reading" and "reading for pleasure" to be distinctly different activities. "Reading" is equated with homework while "reading for pleasure" is described as "the things I choose myself."

The second finding relates to the materials teenagers choose for leisure reading. Popular magazines are the favorite type of reading, with paperback books a close second. Many teenagers enjoy reading magazines and paperback books enough to spend their own money on them. The types of books preferred include romance, mystery, and sports/sports biographies. Here, too, in the choice of reading material, a similarity across groups can be found. The gifted and college-bound girls are just as enthusiastic about romantic stories as their peers. And, while fewer Chapter I and Special Education students mentioned magazines than did students in other groups, they are still preferred as leisure reading material by approximately half the respondents in these groups. While the groups divide on



science fiction, it is popular with over half the boys in both the college-bound and general groups and with a third or more of the college-bound girls.

The third significant finding is that almost all the young adults in our study borrow leisure reading materials from their school libraries. Once again, this finding is across groups with more than three-fourths of the college-bound and general respondents and all of the Chapter I and Special Education respondents mentioning the school library as a source of their leisure reading materials.

When we combine the findings about preferred leisure reading materials with the fact that the majority of rural youth obtain the things they read from the school library, implications for selection and circulation are clear. If school librarians want to encourage reading as a leisure activity, they must include in their collections these materials of choice. Popular magazines that can be circulated, including, but not necessarily limited to, the ones specified in our study, should be considered an appropriate use of acquisition funds. Paperbound books, including the series romances deplored by most book selection guides, but beloved by teenage girls, should be included in the collection. Ephemeral materials that encourage leisure reading, while insufficient in themselves to form a school library collection, should receive precedence over hardbound copies of "good young adult literature" that collect dust on the shelves.

A related finding of this study is the fact that young adults tend to purchase magazines and paperback books or to read the ones available in their homes rather than borrow materials from

the public library. While this may be due in part to the distance rural youth live from their public libraries, the availability of preferred leisure reading materials in the libraries' collections should be considered. It is interesting to note that only a little over half of the college-bound and less than half of those not planning to attend college found their leisure reading materials in the public library. Even so, these statistics are above the national statistics for public library use and argue the examination of policies and materials to encourage the use of public libraries by rural youth.

Much of value can be gleaned from this study of teenage leisure reading patterns for the practice of both school and public librarianship. Frequently, librarians operate from a philosophy which dictates that a library collection should consist of only the "best" books; the "best" books being those so defined by the selection guides and reviewing sources of the profession. The idea behind this philosophy is that exposure to "fine literature" will serve to educate and to improve the patrons a library serves. Unfortunately, however, to paraphrase an old adage: "You can lead a patron to a book, but you can't make him read." Instead, the patron seeks more satisfactory reading materials elsewhere or, worst of all, just doesn't bother to read. If librarians want a population of reading adults, they must provide what young adults consider to be enjoyable reading. And if we slip some "good" young adult authors (in paperback, of course) in among the series romances, or shelve *The New Yorker Magazine* along with *Seventeen* and *Sports Illustrated*, who's the wiser?

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**Keep your Mind in Shape**  
**Go for it! Use your library!**