

What Do Middle-Schoolers Call Reading These Days?

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The day of the ink-stained wretch is just about gone and the day of the screen-striking searcher is rising fast (thank you I-Phone 6, et. al.). We know the coming decades will not be book-centered, but I sometimes think they will not be language-centered either. Since I teach sixth, seventh and eighth graders, I suppose most of my students will get through their lives largely without books, but surely they will still have to read. I question that, however, when those middle school students ask me to define everyday five-letter words and to spell them, when they seem not particularly drawn to the physical books I have loved so much all my life, and when their written responses seem primitive in structure and vocabulary.

A long-standing reading promotion in our building is “Celebrate Reading.” Students get to participate in a special day interacting with children in other grades, parent volunteers, teachers and other adult visitors talking about books they have read. They also get snacks and 20 points of extra credit. All they have to do to get to enjoy the fun is read one book not assigned for school in the 10-week marking period. Each year, it seems, more children fail to read even one book on their own. More significantly, they seem unembarrassed and really unconcerned about missing the common experience of reading books. It has made me wonder – and worry.

What do middle-school students call reading? What are they reading and where? What will literacy look like when they are parents themselves, when they are grandparents? How can I reach them and teach them in the middle of what will no doubt be seen as nothing short of a world-changing technological revolution when those future people look back on these times?

Is there an adolescent reading crisis?

I want to find out more about what middle-schoolers read and how they feel about reading because I worry about their ability to succeed individually and collectively without

strong critical-thinking and communication skills that are best developed, I think, by reading.

Perhaps much of our cultural discourse will not occur in print anymore, but I firmly believe as long as our human story for thousands of years has been captured in writing, reading is the key to our past, present and future and we need to pass it down to the next generation.

I understand people think the brains of people born into the technology world will work differently than book-era people, but how do you get around the fact that reading skills have always been crucial to people in all walks of life and still are?

Teachers want to feel the lessons they are teaching and the methods they use to deliver them are relevant to their students. For many years, they were. Print was the only game in town and everyone had to play it. Now, as the world outside school changes rapidly, that simply is not the case. Standing in a classroom with a single computer in the back, a smartboard and blackboard in the front, and rows of textbooks, novels, and dictionaries lined up neatly along the shelves in between, it is hard to avoid the fact I am teaching in the juncture of two very different eras. It really does not matter whether teachers today want to cling to their old routines, we have to figure out a way to connect with our students so we will be able to do our best by them.

Reader, journalist, teacher – a long strange trip

I started teaching part-time in 2007, started teaching writing in 2010 and reading in 2012. As I begin my third year of teaching reading, I have gotten used to hearing students say they hate to read and write. I also have gotten over the initial shock I felt when I had more than a few parents blithely inform me that their children were more science and math oriented - as if being able to communicate is not necessary in the sciences and mathematics fields! I would point out to all of them that I didn't know too many scientists who were successful if they did not have the ability to communicate effectively about their work; that mathematics, as well, has plenty of

word-oriented material. I would note, too, that it seemed to me students were actually reading as much as ever in college. I based this on the fact my nieces, who have been going through various universities in the past several years, seem to do lots of reading online and then lots of writing in required posts they must complete by midnight deadlines before the portals close.

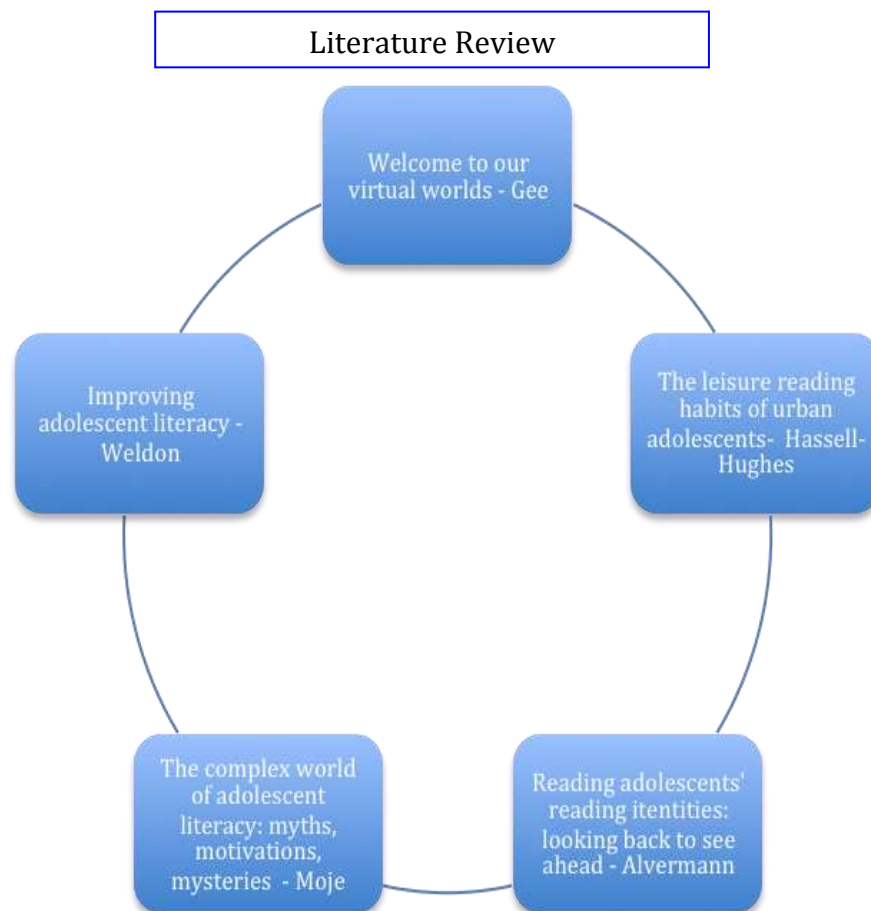
The Common Core standards now driving so much of what I do in my daily work seem to support the observations individuals like me are seeing anecdotally – reading skills seem to be eroding and yet are needed more than ever. The standards essentially outline a progression that suggests tomorrow’s workers will have to be able to read, understand and evaluate complex texts and to write and speak about them intelligently and accurately because, for one thing, there will be even fewer jobs for non-readers than there have been in the past 100 years.

Teaching in a typical Northwest New Jersey suburban district

When the media reports on failing public schools, districts such as the one where I work are not usually the ones being discussed. The small town where I teach has a county park, a major highway running through it and it is easy to commute to New York City and transportation hubs. It supports a K-12 public school district that has a reputation beyond its modest size. It was ranked near the top in a *New Jersey Monthly* magazine ranking of the state’s top public schools in 2012 and has a state-honored music program. Accolades of all sorts for top-performing students, student-musicians and student-athletes are regularly celebrated and rightfully so.

On paper, our middle school seems like the suburban stereotype. We have 541 students; 295 are boys, 256 are girls, and 495 of them are white. We have 29 Asian students, three black students, 13 Hispanic students and one Native American. None of our children are classified as English as Second Language (ESL) learners, 15 qualify for reduced/free lunch services and 66 are classified as special needs students. However, the on-paper statistics do not reflect the

diversity in the community a close observer would see reflected in the middle school where I teach language arts to sixth, seventh and eighth graders. There is a gated community of expensive homes, a lake community made up of many converted summer homes and a very wide range of housing from apartments to estates. Our children come from families with a variety of income levels and they have challenges. Economic and other stresses can affect their ability to learn. They may be busy with sports and other activities, but the video game and social media obsessions of today's young people is universal and that affects their schooling as well. I was looking forward to broadening and deepening my understanding of middle school reading and using the knowledge in my teaching.



Leveraging the digital world

Many people believe the future will be online and that children today are already spending much of their time there playing complex video games. Some prominent researchers, including James Paul Gee, who was cited in many of the research pieces I examined, believe future literacy is being developed there now.

Gee and his co-author contend in a March 2009 *Educational Leadership* article that students are problem-solving and learning advanced language skills in the world of video games.

“Digital media offer a largely untapped but essential resource for students to develop basic reading skills. This is especially important for students who learn to decode print but then falter when they face the more complex academic language of specific content later in school, in areas such as mathematics, science, and social studies,” according to the authors.

The article cites surveys which show children describe themselves as “bored” in school and goes on to explain young people are creating, not just passively ingesting, a variety of digital media forms. The authors describe the new generation of video gamers as “pro-ams” or professional amateurs who develop expertise in areas about which they are passionate including video production, fan fiction, robotics, anime and other popular web topics.

Gee posits in the article that digital media has the “potential to hone the skills necessary for success in our digital world,” crediting today’s young users for coming up with innovative ways of learning a variety of skills, including language and problem-solving skills, to solve “authentic” problems based in virtual worlds on sites where they can be collaborating with people of all ages from all over the world.

Easier said than done; establishing a digital foothold

Teachers must become adept at using technology to help students develop the much-vaunted 21st Century skills, according to Gee and his co-author, Michael H. Levine, who cite examples of websites created by educators that promote use of problem-solving skills. The article concluded with links to a few of these sites, but attempts to click on them revealed a number of them already were dead or no longer active, a somewhat ironic twist considering the point of the article was to indicate it is up to educators to get onto digital platforms and start teaching in protocols today's students enjoy.

I started this research aiming for exactly that goal of finding out where my middle school students spend their time and how I can use that knowledge to help my teaching be more relevant to them. The fact a number of the sites set up to experiment with having students be authentic problem-solvers by doing things such as urban planning in online worlds are no longer active could mean the experiments are over or that the value of having a 10-year-old try urban planning was overestimated.

I am not sure gaming skills or even virtual world skills equal critical-thinking, independent problem-solving and other academic and workplace skills traditionally acquired from the base of reading. In fact, based on what I have observed with middle-schoolers, I think it is safe to say there are gaps. It could be that in the future all work tasks will be set up like video games and workers will be prompted for every last thing they have to do, but as we transition to that future, I have students who struggle with reading, working independently, and basic computer tasks. Is sending the message that everything is like a video game, which means you pause when you feel like it and expect immediate action when you are ready to hit the play button again, really preparing students for adult life? I would like to think students are acquiring

high-level language and critical thinking skills somewhere, but if they are, they do not appear to be transferring those skills to their academics.

What do adolescents say about leisure reading?

In a study published in 2007, researchers Sandra Hughes-Hassell and Pradnya Rodge tried to determine what it looks like when adolescents read what they want to read when they want to read it. They researched leisure reading habits of urban students in a large northeastern city middle school where students were performing below proficient levels in reading tests citing the fact researchers have consistently tied literacy struggles to academic difficulties in all subjects. Specifically, the partners noted research shows there is a correlation between academic success and the amount of leisure reading students do.

The researchers used a survey of 16 multiple-choice and four open-ended questions to determine why students read on their own, when they do it, how much they do it and what they like to read. Their results, they said, showed their student reporting on leisure reading was consistent with other such studies. Some 22 percent of the students described themselves as reading all the time, while about half said they do it when they have an opportunity. Six percent said they do not read and the remaining 22 percent described themselves as reading only for school purposes.

What they discovered as different from previous studies on the topic, though, was what students chose to read – magazines were heavily favored over books, which had been the favored medium in earlier research. Perhaps a similar study done today would show magazines supplanted by online sources.

Just 36 percent of the students in this study said they enjoyed reading – and that was 2007. Equally discouraging, a full 46 percent of those who said they read on their own did it

almost as a last resort saying they turned to reading when they were bored and had nothing else to do.

Those who reported not reading on their own cited preferring other activities such as watching television, playing video games and spending time with peers in significant numbers. This group also reported in significant numbers that they simply struggled with reading in general. They described not being able to concentrate, falling asleep simply not being able to read well.

Reaching young readers where they read

In their conclusion, like Gee, Hughes-Hassell and Rodge call on educators to recognize the need to acknowledge the overwhelming presence of the internet in the lives of adolescents. They quote an even earlier piece of research to support their claim “... our definition of reading has to expand to include websites, e-books, e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms, instant messaging and listervs” (Schmar-Dobler, 2003)” in their work.

Their recommendations are hardly groundbreaking, which is not to say they are not on point. They say educators and librarians should be offering these urban students reading selections that embrace their heritage and culture, that reflect the types of material they enjoy reading such as manga, which is based on Japanese anime. They also suggest educators and media specialists – the newer term for librarians - seek funding to make material more accessible to students both in their schools and local libraries. Just as importantly, they say the best thing adults, especially parents, can do is promote and encourage leisure reading and to be passionate about reading themselves. I could not agree more with the need for parents and other adults to be unabashed lovers and promoters of reading in whatever media children choose to pursue it. It is just as much of a challenge in suburban communities as it is in urban ones.

What influences how young adults are seen as readers?

One of the most fascinating pieces of research I read was written by Donna E. Alvermann. She is a distinguished literacy researcher who also was very frequently cited across the research materials I reviewed. Alvermann tackled the interesting question of the culture of what she termed “reading professionals” and its part in constructing the “struggling reader label.” She used a case study of a ninth grade boy she and her colleagues worked with as part of a study on offering an after-school media club to disadvantaged students to illustrate these issues. In what seems to be a typical situation for teen males everywhere, the boy much preferred playing video games to engaging in reading activities.

Alvermann detailed the history of educational labeling of readers who are struggling over her 40 years in the field, noting the journey from the labels of slow reader through disabled and at-risk reader to struggling reader and, most recently, reader who struggles, does not do much to change its effect on the self-esteem of these children. She also suggests labeling students against standards or expectations based on what teachers, textbook and test creators and even parents create as the cultural expectation of what literacy is, may become irrelevant “in the wake of new technologies and changing literacies.” There it is again, the suggestion we are entering a whole new ball game where students are not reading because in their “culture” it does not seem to them to be valuable.

However, when Alvermann moves on to focus on the boy in the case study, she outlines how the students who participated in the club for 15 weeks were invited to pick the materials the club would purchase and were being studied for how they “made meaning” or built culture around media literacy. All had been described to researchers as students who were struggling across the curriculum because they had difficulty reading their school texts.

A common research thread; looking beyond print reading

Like some other studies I reviewed, researchers were trying to ascertain if student literacy was being developed outside of the traditional printed word. For the first eight weeks, Alvermann reported, the boy hardly took part in the club's literacy activities, but instead would go off by himself to play a video game. Alvermann describes trying to engage the boy by playing the video game, by leafing through a magazine with "cheat codes" to help players advance in the game and reports, in retrospect, she had placed him in the box of being a person who avoids reading to an extreme because he is "struggling."

When the boy then switched to another game, he asked the researchers to buy a book on it so he could learn and advance in the game. Alvermann noted she and other researchers watched him refer to the book while playing the game and that he was willing to email back and forth with them to answer questions about the game and read it fluently as he tried to show them how to play the game.

Confirming that adult fear – catching up after falling behind is very tough

Still, the researcher pointed out, the boy still needs to do that schoolwork and to be "in the race" for success in the culture. She outlined a labor-intensive series of strategies to get him to understand he needed to succeed in school for other things in life to open up. These included helping him to realize he is already a reader by pointing out how he used reading and writing skills with the video game book and explaining it to the researchers in emails. She also said it was important to show him the consequences of letting others categorize him as a weak reader.

It is important to fight the tendency to label students because, as Alvermann said, that label results in students being treated as less able and, therefore, could lead to them getting a lower level of opportunity and services to help them improve. Literacy and the way children

approach it is complicated even for experts with years of experience. That somehow makes me feel better about my own situation as a reading teacher with much less expertise and knowledge about this very complex subject, but something else she mentioned almost in passing made me feel worse.

Alvermann was explaining how labeling can lead to depriving a student of an opportunity when she mentioned another boy who was brought to one of her colleagues by his mother who was concerned about his reading. It turned out the sixth grader was reading at a second grade level and had a reading disability. Alvermann briefly described intensive one on one intervention with a literacy expert from the university over the summer and then with two different ones during the school year working with him from his second grade level. It took two years of this heavy intervention to get him to a fourth grade level! Her point was about confidence building and remediating. How realistic is it to think that can happen for every student in that situation. And what about the video game playing boy? Alvermann had time-intensive and long-term suggestions for improving his academic performance by addressing his reading issues too, but there was no indication they did, would or could occur.

It's complicated: myths, motivations and mysteries of adolescent literacy

A major long-term study of adolescent literacy conducted out of the University of Michigan and led by Elizabeth Birr Moje synthesizes much of the information addressed across the work on adolescent literacy I surveyed. The study supports the work of other researchers who state that the field has to catch up with the move of adolescents to the internet. Like other studies, the Michigan study notes teens are online and that is where they do much of their reading and writing. However, it also validates the conclusions of many others that this is not translating into academic literacy as defined by adults.

Interestingly, while the Common Core is pushing reading of short bursts of informational text, the Moje-led study suggests the only leisure reading that shows any correlation to academic gains is reading of novels – the anti-Common Core as it were. Further, students who report a higher level of writing on their own actually demonstrate a negative effect on academic literacy. This speaks to the Pete Rose theory of practice. The Cincinnati Reds great said if you practice poorly you just get really good at doing things wrong.

The study shows students are communicating online on social networks as a way to achieve social standing and recognition. Moje and her fellow researchers report their findings show young adults are reading and writing for many different reasons, in many different ways and, ultimately, to meet their needs.

Ultimately, the Moje team supports the findings of Hughes-Hassell and Rodge and others that readers in this age group in particular need to feel a connection to what they are reading; that reading about people like them and subjects that interest them is important.

However, these researchers also pinpointed across their two sequences of research performed over time the young adults cited in large numbers novels they read for school such as “The Outsiders,” “Hatchet” and “Holes” bubbled up as favorites. Moje’s team state this shows the role of adults in pointing students to literature they will enjoy is also crucial. They said this shows students need that guidance from more knowledgeable adults and are open to it.

This study also shows that while adolescents are reading and writing outside of the school setting, it does not seem to be enough to translate into improved academic achievement. Moje and her fellow researchers point to the work of Gee regarding video game social worlds and networks which draw adolescent users appear to do so because of the opportunity it offers them to form identities and gain recognition in social groups they value. Like Gee, they suggest more

research should be done to see if that need for social connection and recognition could be used to “recommend” or direct students to online communities such as more academically oriented sites where historians and scientists communicate. This could possibly get this population interested in content that would be more useful to them academically. The Moje team, like Gee and other researchers, believe it is important to further examine ways to help students improve their academic achievement by connecting with the online way adolescents are engaging in literacy.

What was interesting about this study was that it was a long-term and showed student literacy is happening outside of traditional channels on social media, gaming and other internet sites and that this is increasing steadily and has to be addressed by educators. However, the study also shows it is the most traditional media form of all, the novel, which turns out to be the only type of leisure reading that can be correlated to gains in academic performance.

The argument for adolescent literacy in “crisis”

Government needs to declare various crises to present itself as the solution to them – usually with lots of our money. However, a 2010 Council of State Governments report declaring an adolescent literacy crisis had some convincing support.

First, it pointed out direct reading instruction ends at fourth grade, which is why test scores at that level look so good. However, students who continue to struggle with the actual mechanics of reading past the end of aggressive reading assessment and intervention in fourth grade are indeed headed for big trouble. Test scores in the middle school and high school levels show a drop in reading skills when students need them most – as reading in all subject areas becomes more complex and demanding. However, the report notes, the structure of middle and high schools by subject area creates a barrier to improving literacy because teachers in non-language arts subjects are “protective” of their curricula and believe their job is to teach their

subject and not reading and writing. As educators and researchers say in the report, people who cannot read and understand complex text are unable to master increasingly different science, math, history and literature classes as they move up the grades. This means reading difficulties can define a student's entire educational experience.

The report stated training teachers to recognize and then aid struggling readers is crucial. Students who were shown in standardized testing to have deficiencies in reading were diverted into intensive remedial programs. Their specific areas of difficulty were addressed and well-trained instructors tackled those problems with the goal of raising their reading ability so they could succeed across all curricular areas.

The report synthesizes the research and the test scores so clearly and leads back to the place where I started. As someone who was able to skate through many years of school without developing good study habits because I was a voracious reader, I know reading well is a huge advantage in school. When I started teaching reading two years ago, I was shocked to see student answers that contained events and facts that had not even happened in the stories. This literature review showed me I am far from alone in seeing that disconnect. Many researchers and concerned stakeholders are wondering what I am wondering – what is the future of reading?

Survey, create academic profiles, compare and correlate

I started my research by surveying my seventh grade English class students about their reading and leisure habits. Our district has two separate classes for language arts, one is the writing oriented class called the English class and the other is reading. I chose to use this group because I teach sixth grade reading and, therefore, have seen a number of these students for a full year in reading class and now am seeing them again in the English class. I thought this could be helpful in terms of giving me a more complete understanding of the results.

After gathering this data, my plan was to compare those self-reports and self-assessments on reading against academic profiles I created of each student. How do the two sets of data compare to each other? For example, are there correlations between children who are high academic performers and the types of activities they do outside of school?

My hope was to gain insight about what students read outside of school and where they read it. Also, I wanted to see if there are any connections between what they read and how much they read and their academic performance. Are students who read more – no matter where that may be and on what platform – doing better than students who read less?

How do my students compare to 2007 Philadelphia adolescents?

Originally, I planned to create my own survey. However, I ended up deciding to contact the author of one of the research studies in my literature review, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, to see if she would let me use her survey. She graciously agreed to send me the survey she and her research team used in 2007 to research urban adolescent reading habits in Philadelphia, Pa. The survey included questions about what they read, how long they read, when they read, why they read and how they felt about reading. It also asked for information on how much time they spent on homework, how much they sleep, how much free time they have and what they do with it. The survey was done during English class. This gave me an extra source of comparison: How do my 2014 seventh grade suburban students compare to those 2007 urban adolescents?

At the time I conducted my research, I had a total of 62 seventh graders in three classes. Of the 62 seventh graders during the research period, 25 were female and 37 were male. Two of the male students had moved from resource room for English in sixth grade to my regular education classes in seventh grade. These moves were parental choice over the objections of our special education team.

When I started creating the profiles, two factors dropped my total number of research subjects. First, six students did not do the survey, so they, obviously, could not be included. Second, when I started gathering fourth grade and sixth grade data, I discovered some students must have moved in to our district or our school system from elsewhere because we did not have fourth grade SRI and standardized test data on them.

The end result was that between students who did not participate in the survey and students without prior year SRI and NJ ASK data, I lost 11 students and ended up with a student sample set of 51 students; 30 males and 21 females. One of the special education males was among the group of students not in the final data set.

When I administered the survey, I told students they were getting a chance to help me with my homework and that I would give them six points for doing it. I repeatedly emphasized there was no right or wrong answer, that they should just respond.

Scholastic tool measures reading comprehension – or does it?

I developed the academic profiles of the students using SRI (Scholastic Reading Inventory) scores and New Jersey Assessment of Student Knowledge (NJ ASK) scores. The SRI is marketed by Scholastic as a way to determine student reading levels based on vocabulary recognition and comprehension and to track growth over time. The SRI is an online assessment that immediately generates a lexile level and suggested reading list targeted at the student's reading level. The lexile scores are ranked from 100 to 1,700; 100 is beginning reader and 1,700 is college level. Each grade has a lexile range associated with it. I collected data from fourth grade through the fall seventh grade SRI for my students. Fourth grade lexile range is 600 to 900; seventh grade is 850 to 1,100. Based on those numbers, the SRI ranks students on a scale from far below grade level to advanced proficient and gives them a percentile rank against other

students. Our district uses the SRI from elementary school through middle school. Students take the SRI three times over the course of each school year.

For whatever reason, teachers in the middle school only have access to middle school results on the SRI and NJ ASK results from fifth grade, for incoming sixth graders, through eighth grade scores of students who are out the door and in the high school as freshmen by the time we see it.

Data collection kicks some people out of the pool

I was able to work with our school media specialist to run SRI searches for all my seventh graders through the Scholastic database to which she has access. I chose to take their scores from fourth grade through their fall seventh grade SRI and reviewed them. An initial look at those SRI scores was a bit confusing as there did not seem to be a steady upward trajectory as students moved up the grades. In further speaking with the media specialist, I learned only the fall SRI is on similar content. The tests the rest of the year could be on a variety of material. Armed with this information, I decided to use only the fall SRI from fourth grade and the fall seventh grade SRI data on the students. This dropped out a lot of erratic scores for each individual. However, it also resulted in my losing some of my data trail because this was when I discovered some students must have transferred in to our district after fourth grade. We did not have SRI data for all the students and we also did not have NJ ASK on all of them.

I collected the NJ ASK scores for my students from their fourth grade year and their sixth grade year. Again, because our building testing results start with fifth grade scores, I had to go to the curriculum supervisor who was able to help me collect the testing data for the students' fourth grade NJ ASK. Although the students are now seventh graders, standardized testing takes place in the spring of the academic year and they had not yet taken a standardized test when I

conducted my research. In addition, the NJ ASK has been replaced by a new Common Core aligned standardized test, PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers), so it would not be possible to do a fair comparison anyway.

Running the numbers; is there a story here?

I created an Excel spreadsheet plotting survey responses. I added SRI data for the fall of fourth grade and the fall of seventh grade and NJ ASK scores for fourth and sixth grade. Since they were easily accessible, I decided to add the NJ ASK math scores for possible reference.

Many many hours later, I had a spreadsheet with columns from A to BV. I was extremely proud of myself for persevering, for putting in the hours to organize my data. However, then it was time for that big English department question – so what?

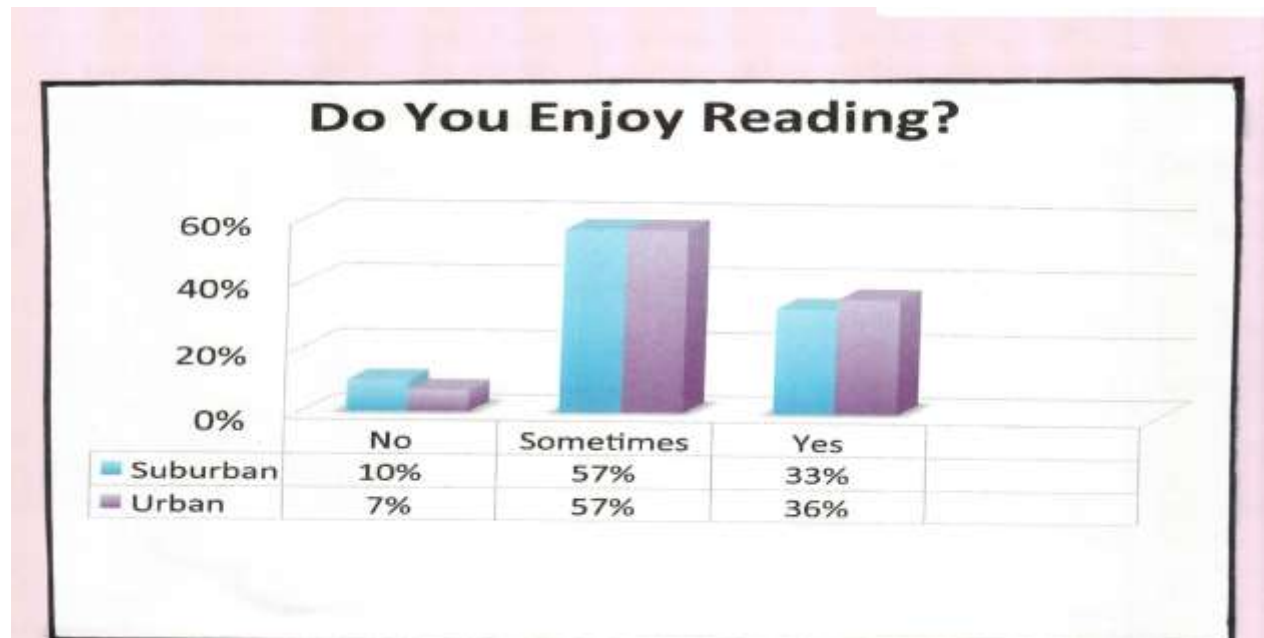
It was time to see if all those numbers told a story. The good news was I had lots of data. The bad news was I had lots of data. When I did a review of all the survey responses, I realized there was a fair bit of repetition on the Hughes-Hassell survey. This is understandable since it was a university research survey and these experts were clearly working to make sure their responses were valid by asking for the same types of information in slightly differently worded questions throughout the survey.

I decided to focus on the reading questions and try to see if there was any correlation between the way students felt about reading and what they read and their academic profiles. Again, I had to get help from an administrator to run correlation formulas in the spreadsheet to see if we could identify any connection between the students' survey responses about reading and how they performed academically. We also ran a correlation formula comparing NJ ASK language arts scores to SRI scores to see if those correlated.

I also got the idea, which was not part of my original plan, to compare the results of my survey to the results of the Hughes-Hassell survey. That survey was done in 2007 in Philadelphia, Pa., among urban adolescents. My students were suburban students and, although it was just seven years later, they certainly had a different level of technology available to them, mainly smartphones. Essentially handheld computers, these types of cell phones were not prevalent among the general population in 2007 and, I think it is safe to say, not the standard gear for young teens they seem to be today – at least among my students.

Survey symbiosis and the test data muddle

The survey asked students if they enjoyed reading and offered three choices: yes, no, sometimes. The vast majority of my students, 29, selected sometimes and five, all boys, said no. The remaining 17, or 33 percent, said yes. In the Hughes-Hassell study, 36 percent said they enjoyed reading. The two groups certainly seemed to be pretty close in percentages.

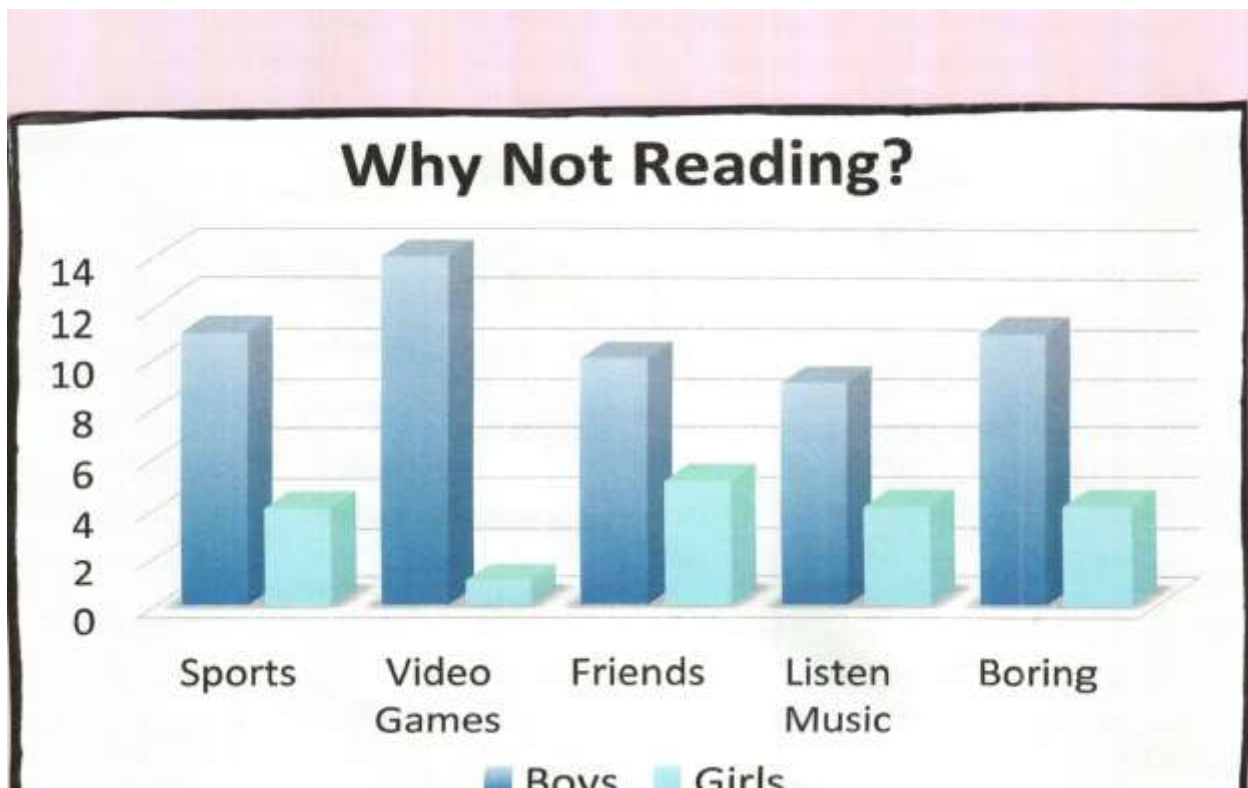


Asked in the survey how often they read, students had four choices; constantly for my own satisfaction and I love it; don't have time to read for fun, but like to when I can; only read for school; don't read much at all. Fourteen percent of my students, seven, described themselves as

constantly reading, compared to 22 percent on the Hughes-Hassell study. Thirty percent of my students, 16, only read for school, compared to 22 percent in the Hughes-Hassell study. On the other two responses; reading when they can and don't read, my student percentages matched the urban study exactly. Fifty percent of my students, 25, said they read when they can, just like Hughes-Hassell's result. Also, six percent, or three of my students, said they don't read – exactly the same percentage as those in the urban student study.

Non-readers and lukewarm readers are sporty and digital

One of those multiple-choice survey questions asked subjects if they didn't like to read or didn't like to read much, why not, and they were given 18 choices and asked to check all that apply. The top five choices selected by my students were they would rather play sports, play video games, spend time with friends, listen to music, or it was boring. I captured responses beyond that by tallying them as "other."



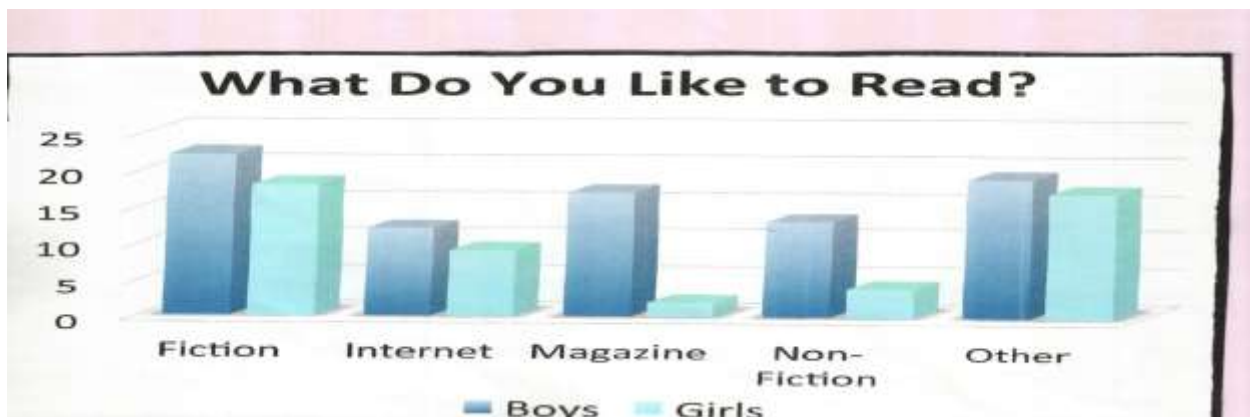
This question revealed huge differences between boys and girls. Eleven boys said they don't read

because it is boring, compared to two girls. A total of 15 students said they would rather play sports; 11 boys and four girls. Fifteen also said they would rather play video games – 14 of them were boys and just one was a girl. Even spending time with friends, 15 students total selected it, skewed toward boys. Ten boys picked it and five girls – a bit of a surprise to anyone who spends most of his or her day with middle schoolers. Listening to music rather than reading was picked by nine boys and four girls. Twenty-four respondents selected from among the other 13 choices; 16 boys and eight girls.

Although this question had some overlap with the 2007 urban adolescent responses gathered by the Hughes-Hassell team, there were big differences here too. The top three responses for urban adolescents were watching television, playing video games and spending time with friends. Their other top choices were not present in my responses at all. The urban adolescents cited struggling with reading, having trouble concentrating and falling asleep when they tried to read in significant numbers. In my results, only one student referenced struggling as a reading. He checked trouble concentrating as a reason he does not read.

Adolescent readers are all about fiction

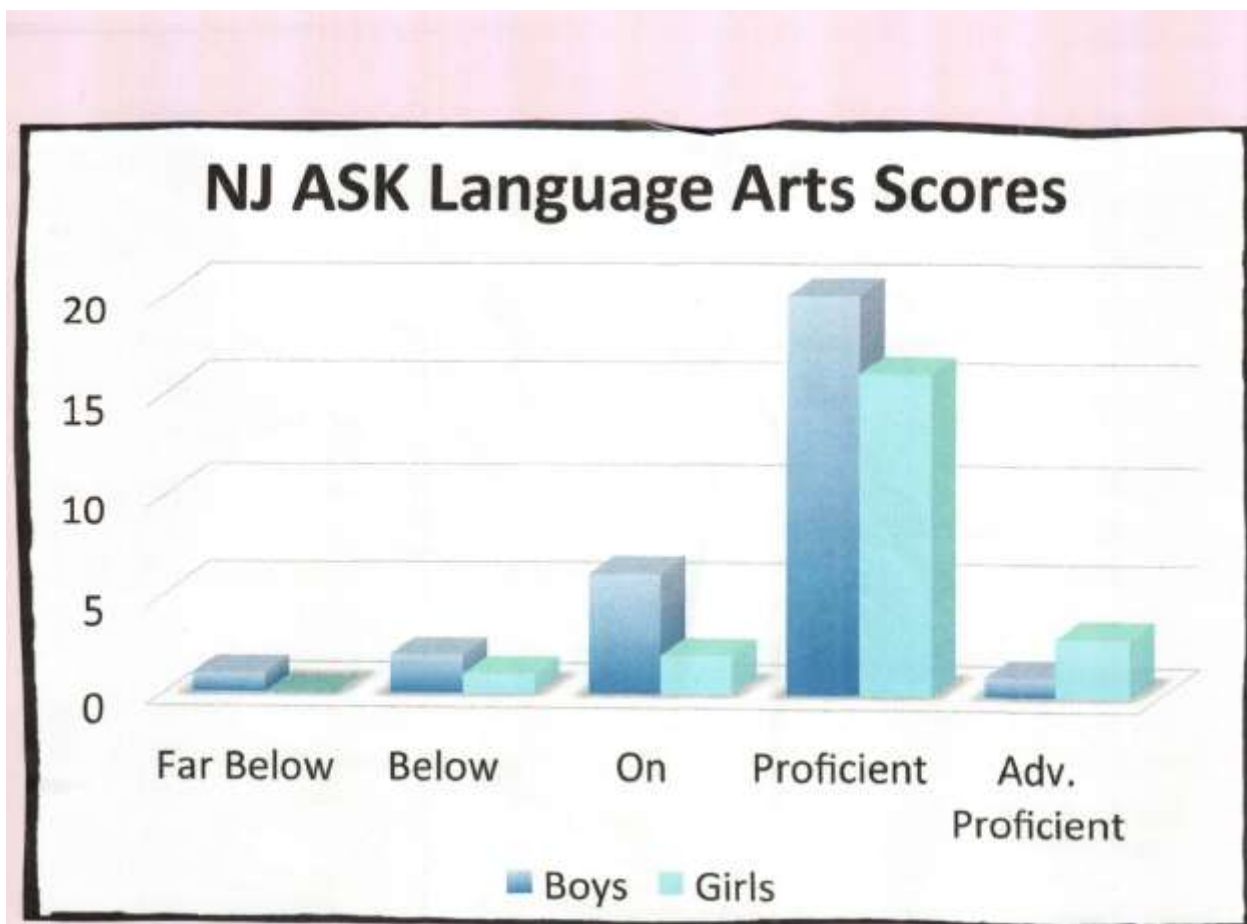
The two groups also differed in responses to the question about favorite thing to read. This question offered 18 choices and invited students to check all that apply.



The top choice of my seventh graders was fiction books – 40 of them checked that option; 22

boys and 18 girls. This was followed closely by “stuff on the internet” at 21; 12 boys and nine girls. Magazines about sports, cars and wrestling was next, but was heavily favored by boys; 17 boys selected this choice, while just two girls did so. Non-fiction books were chosen by 13 boys and four girls. Thirty-six of my students also checked other choices among the 18 available; a near even split with 19 boys and 17 girls. When Hughes-Hassell’s team surveyed the urban adolescents in 2007, magazines were the heavily favored option. There still seems to be somewhat of a correlation between the two groups – magazines were the second ranked choice by my students, after all.

Surveys to scores – is there a connection?

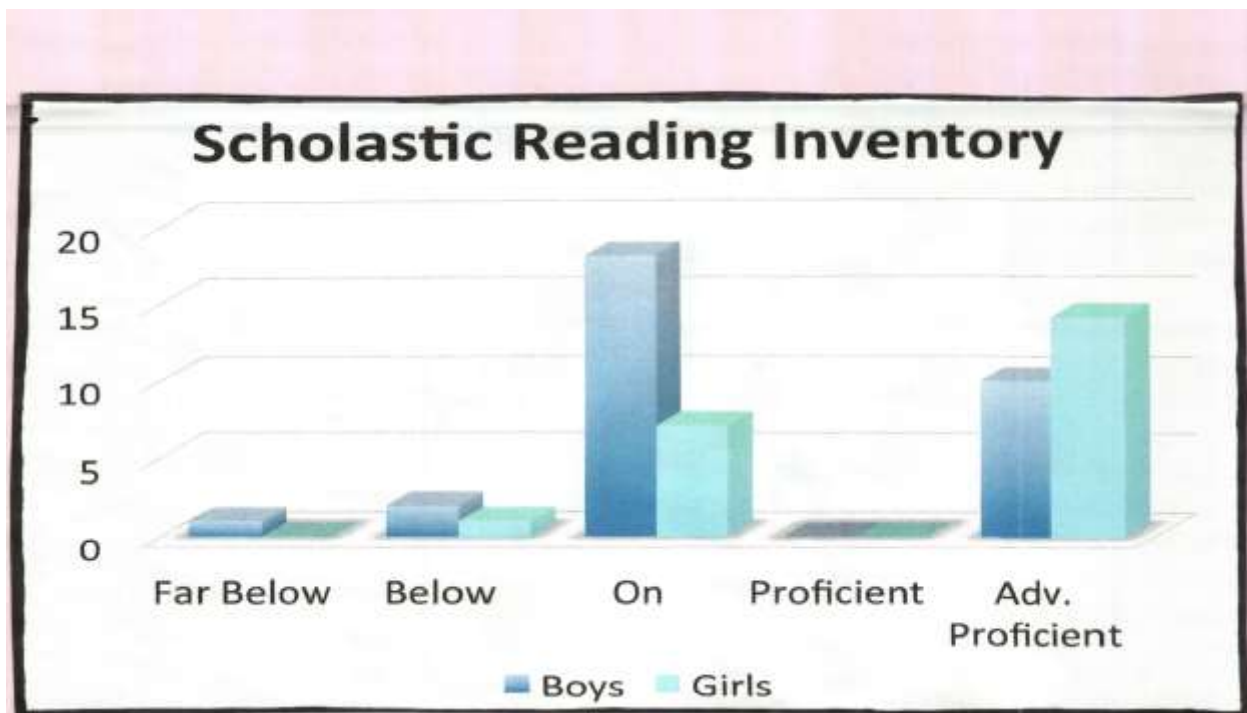


Generally, I have separate class rosters with test scores for students. As a result of doing this research, I looked at all my seventh graders as a cluster and learned, from a NJ ASK perspective,

they are truly average. I do not have advanced English classes and have been given classes each year that tend to have significantly more boys than girls.

My seventh graders averaged 219 overall on the language arts portion of their sixth grade NJ ASK tests; 215 for boys and 225 for girls. In fourth grade, they were lower, largely due to the boys having a lower average. The average for the group was 206; 201 for boys and 213 for girls. A perfect score on NJ ASK is 300, 250 and up is advanced proficient, 200 to 249 is considered proficient. However, in our district we consider students hovering around 200 to be at-risk of becoming partially proficient.

There were four advanced proficient scores among the seventh graders in my data group; one boy and three girls. One boy was far below proficient at 173; three others, two boys and one girl, were below 200; eight students were between 200 and 206 and the vast majority – 35 – were in the middle of the proficient range.



Their SRI scores were a little different. The lexile scores for each grade level are ranges with overlaps from grade to grade. So, sixth grade is 800 to 1,050; seventh grade is 850 to 1,100, and

eighth grade is 900 to 1,150. My seventh graders averaged 1,068; boys 1,020 and girls 1,135.

One student was far below grade level, another was below, 25 were on grade level, none were proficient, and 24 were advanced proficient.

Getting lost in the middle

From the point of view of my big quest, however, it turned out to be a bit of a bust. There was little to no correlation between how the students replied to questions about reading on the survey and their academic profiles. The only clear correlation was at the very high end and the very low end. The student who was formerly in a special education setting strongly and consistently responded to the survey questions as a non-reader. His SRI score was far below grade level and his NJ ASK score also was far below proficient.

On the opposite end of the scale, I had only four students ranked as advanced proficient on NJ ASK. They were all advanced proficient on their SRI assessments too. The responses of all four were also strongly affirmative on the reading survey questions.

As for the rest of the students, which is to say almost all of them, there was simply no rhyme or reason or strong correlation between how they answered the reading questions and how they scored on their NJ ASK and SRI assessments. The students largely fell in the middle of the range when asked about how much they read and if they liked to read and did not match up in any consistent way with SRI scores or NJ ASK scores. In the case of the SRI reading assessment, students as a whole tended to run at the higher end of the range in their scores, but it did not match in any noticeable way with positive responses about reading on the survey. Some students who were tilting to the positive side on reading on the survey were pretty low on the proficient scale of NJ ASK and others were on the higher end of NJ ASK showed no particular strong affinity for reading.

The unexpected find was how often the results of my small suburban student sample mirrored the results of the larger urban research done by Hughes-Hassell and her colleagues. We had the same percentage of students saying they basically didn't read on their own, for example.

Coming full circle – is it all about the technology revolution?

This last finding, in particular, leads back to where I started this project. It is easy to be drawn into the extremely strong gravitational pull of the black hole – or Death Star – or whatever one wants to call the technology world into which we are all being inescapably and inexorably drawn. The question is are young people who have been born into this world going to be fundamentally different than their parents and grandparents? Specifically, do they still see reading as something that is part of their universe? Does it matter? I tried to figure out if students still valued reading and if students who did value reading benefited academically from the practice.

The short answer is it seems on the extremes of the scale, very low performing students and very high performing students, a correlation between enjoyment and volume of reading and academic performance does exist. Students who really love reading and do it on their own because they like it and, who in my survey appear to love reading fiction books best, turn out to be students who are testing well on reading assessments and standardized tests. That dovetailed nicely with the findings of the largest study I reviewed in my literature research – a long-term study out of the University of Michigan – that researched thousands of young people over more than a decade. With a great deal more data than I was able to obtain in my small study, this research showed the only correlation between reading and positive academic performance was a slight academic benefit for students who specifically read novels.

The extreme on the other end would appear to be a logical result too. A student who is significantly below grade level on reading and significantly below proficient in language arts according to the testing data also turned out to have a strong correlation with his negative responses on the reading survey.

The answer is there is no answer – just questions

Although it was a bit disappointing not to see a magical line-by-line correlation between what students felt about reading and their academic performance on standardized tests, in retrospect, it would appear I should have expected it. The results I obtained showed in a micro way what lots of macro research done by people much better funded and much more experienced than I am has demonstrated: we do not know how what children are doing online is affecting them academically. We really do not. A common theme in all the research I reviewed, and there is plenty of it, is the kids are online and educators, researchers (and anyone else who want to know what's up with them) need to find out a way to follow them there to reach them where they are basically living. Google and Amazon will, no doubt, crack that nut first and they will target that great middle that is so elusive for researchers.

Perhaps people who read enough to have it make a difference in their academic lives are outliers, as are people who are strongly averse to it. Perhaps the vast middle reflects most people. Most people are only going to read when they are motivated to do so – in the case of my survey subjects, a significant number said they read only what they must for school. Someone like me who has been a voracious reader all my life did not stop reading when I left school because it was my primary leisure time activity. That is not so for most people.

As far as grownups knowing what adolescents are up to at any given moment – has that really changed? Robert Louis Stevenson said, “Things are as they have always been, as they will always be. There is nothing new under the sun.” I read it in a book.

One could get a bit upset at the notion that one ended up finding out what one already had learned from one’s research. I also confirmed something else I thought I knew about myself before starting this project – I am not a data, Excel, chart, person. Now I know why.

Pick your tools carefully before you start running data

One of the biggest lessons I learned was that compiling quantitative data is a painstaking and time-consuming process. While I was excited about using the Hughes-Hassell survey because I felt it had the validity of having been used as an actual tool by experienced researchers, I soon ran into some difficulties. Of the 16 multiple-choice questions, 10 had “check all that apply” answers with choices that ranged from six to 27 options. Many were in double-digits. I sought out the aid of a science colleague who suggested I hand-tally the responses, determine the top four or five, responses for those questions and capture all the other responses with “other.”

I worked through the survey challenges and the Excel difficulties, which were also tough. Perhaps I would consider simplifying the survey question choices and not making as detailed a spreadsheet as I did. There was definitely data I ended up not using, which leads me to believe I could have been more thoughtful about the survey before just jumping in with both feet.

There also was no getting around the fact the survey was self-reported data. For example, students were asked how much time they spent on homework in a typical day. The answers for my students ranged from 15 minutes to three hours with an overall average of 80 minutes and negligible variation between males (81 minutes) and females (79 minutes). Reviewing that answer against the students and my knowledge of them academically, for the most part, I thought

the individual answers made sense. I knew, for example, that one struggling student has tutors for individual subjects and is pushed hard by her parents. I was not surprised to see she reported spending two to three hours a night on homework. A boy I know is the younger sibling of an extremely high-performing and academically strong student with parents who push him hard also struggles academically. It did not surprise me to see he reported spending two hours a night on homework. On the other hand, one of my least motivated students who regularly fails to do homework and is below average to average in ability reported spending two hours a night on homework. I found this a bit surprising. Who knows how students define “doing homework” – is it in their rooms with music, cell phones, computers and many breaks?

For that matter, how do they define free time? Overall, my students reported having an average of 3.55 hours of free time a day; females averaged 3.16 hours and males averaged 3.81 hours. The vast majority of my students reported zero time spent on jobs and chores, so it did not seem meaningful to check average that data.

One thing that became very clear when analyzing the survey results is that this free time is not filled with choosing to read! Out of the 51 students in my final data set one – only one – reported reading as one of the things he likes to do in his free time. It was the boy who is the younger sibling to an academic high-flier with parents who push him hard. His fourth grade NJ ASK language arts score was 212 and his sixth grade score was 235.

Defining students strictly by grades and test scores does not take into account there are many variables in a child’s life. There are students who are intellectually gifted but perhaps in challenging family or personal circumstances. There are students who are middle of the road intellectually but who work hard. There are socio-economic differences and other issues. However, at least in my experience with NJ ASK scores and my students, I would say for the

most part, they reflected what I thought of a student academically. The test was used for years and was well-established and reliable. In a district like ours, students are not showing up hungry or in distress to take the test. Proctoring the test every year, I saw one or two students who appeared not to be giving a sincere effort, but most students dutifully gave it their best shot and came out roughly where I would have expected. PARCC is all new ground, of course, but I was comfortable with the NJ ASK scores as part of my academic profiles of students.

This data supported what a senior reading teacher in our building has told me repeatedly since I started working with her on sixth grade reading. She said she finds the SRI scores tend to run high and do not match what she sees in classroom assessment of readers. It does seem a bit odd that half of a group of middle of the road, average students would turn out as advanced proficient on this reading assessment.

Logically, of course, most of us are average, but there is so much variety in that great big middle! Going in to this project, I really wanted to find an answer for something that was bothering me – what is with these kids and reading? That is clearly coming from a place of judgment, of what is wrong with you, why don't you love reading like me? I think the fact I ended up choosing to travel that data path and used a survey created by someone else ended up being a very effective counter for any bias I may have felt in that regard.

Are we measuring effectively and are we measuring what matters?

One of the questions I found myself considering after completing this research is just how valid are the SRI reading assessments our district has been using? When I charted my results, the SRI scores did not line up with the NJ ASK scores, showing a large swath of these students otherwise turning out as solidly average on data as advanced proficient readers. As a relatively new reading teacher, I was asking an experienced reading teacher about the scores and she

offered the view they did not jibe with what she sees in the classroom. Since we usually just take the students to the computer lab, have them take the test and print out their results, I had never really looked at the scores over time or charted all my students. When I did, the scores did seem out of line with NJ ASK scores and class assessments.

Another question, really a remaining question, is have adolescent feelings about reading undergone some huge change because they have technology we did not? Technology is obviously a game-changer, but perhaps there are some underlying truths about reading that exist separately from the techno revolution. My survey results showed an exact match with the Hughes-Hassell survey done in 2007 that I used on the percentage of students who described themselves as, essentially, non-readers.

I asked a reading specialist in our building about technology and reading after finishing my data analysis. I asked her if she thought all the online and technology options students have that they did not have when she started her career in 2002 have led to her seeing a change in her students and their reading. She, as I am sure she would agree, is addicted to her smartphone, by the way. Her response was that there are always kids who aren't going to read and it is not because of what other options are available. The percentage from 2007 to 2014 in my two surveys was an exact match. Perhaps her experiential observation has some validity.

There was certainly no shortage of research on reading when I started working on the literature review for this project. It was very interesting and it made me enthusiastic about taking a closer look at my own students as readers. Looking at them as a block across the grade instead of individual classes, seeing that their responses were in line with children in a completely different setting several years earlier was surprising and exciting too.

However, still out there as a question is, when should we stop teaching people how to read? Is this a case of the chicken and the egg? Perhaps young adolescents would read more if they were better at it. I have never had a parent ask me how to get his or her child to read less. We seem to have universally agreed it is important, but part of the reason I started this research is because I was surprised to be asked the meaning of simple four and five letter words by sixth and seventh graders. Should we be doing more reading instruction and intervention for all readers in the middle school years? If so, what methods would be the most effective?

Come to think of it – deconstructing the myth of myself as a reader

When I started this project, I hoped I would develop a deeper understanding of my students and reading. The literature review was hugely beneficial in that regard. I was amazed to learn we stop teaching people how to read in fourth grade and discouraged to learn how very difficult it is to take a student who is reading below grade level and raise their reading level. It is human nature to take for granted things that come easily to us. What I did not expect to that this work led me to reexamine myself as a reader.

My mother always said she did not remember me learning how to read – I could just read and would read anything and everything. I cannot recall learning to read either. It turns out, researchers do not know why some people are able to decode language easily and others are not. Reading has been one of the greatest gifts in my life and I feel even greater gratitude for it after all I learned about the complexities of it and the way struggles with reading affect people all through school and all through life. However, turning over the reading survey results in my mind and talking about the issue of middle school reading and my results with more experienced teachers led me to take another look at the narrative I had created for myself about my own reading life. When I was young, I read lots of fiction – just like my students today. However, as I

got older, other things became more important to me. I read magazines more than books in my teen years – just as Hughes-Hassell’s survey respondents and a decent chunk of my own students reported doing. I think that is because as we start to grow up, magazines and now internet sites are special interest publications where we can go to find out about just those things we are obsessed with at the moment – fashion, sports, celebrities and so forth. Even as an adult – and adolescents are young adults, I had to admit, upon reflection, I have become more of a book collector than a reader of books. I really and truly want to read all the books I buy, but I don’t do as much book reading as I would like.

In the government study proclaiming an adolescent literacy crisis that was one of my research sources, I found the personal stories of two people who described that agony in detail, as well as how hard they struggled to learn to read as adults, upsetting. I know there are people who just see numbers and their relationships in a way I never could, but I think it is easier to get through life with limits on your trigonometry ability than your reading ability. Even thinking about this more deeply, I realized that what spurred them to pursue literacy in their adulthood was a realization they needed it for practical reasons. This is essentially what all my research and reflection showed about my students – when there is a reason to read, they read; when something they need or are interested in is in text – wherever it is – they read it. Imagine that!

Anyone could benefit from reading about the literature I reviewed in my study. I found it invaluable in terms of gaining insight into the complexities of reading and the long and extensive research base developed around this crucial skill. If it then spurred any of those readers; young adults, parents, teachers, administrators and others to want to read more about reading research, it would be time well-spent.

My more informed perspective will help me see my readers more clearly

The survey, also, is an effective tool for learning more about adolescents and their reading habits, and worked very well for me in my research. I think other teachers in my building may be interested in surveying their students as well and it would be interesting to compare results. Perhaps surveying students in the Advanced English classes would prove an interesting contrast with the results of surveying my students. Surveying students in resource support classes could be another view on the overall population in our building.

I have become a better-informed reading teacher by completing this research. Data-driven instruction is something we talk about in our district, but we tend to speak of it in terms of test scores and classroom data. It can also seem daunting and overwhelming to teachers to take on something that seems to be lots of work with no promise of something practical and useful as a result. Teacher action research is a nice way to approach this challenge. The framework is teacher-based, but anything teachers do has their students at its core. This exercise has made me feel empowered to try to find other ways to learn more about my students beyond the traditional data streams of classroom, grades, SRIs and standardized tests. I can foresee getting information that will help me to seek out in a more effective way resources that could be helpful to students beyond our traditional curriculum-driven lesson planning. Of course I have a responsibility to deliver curricula to the best of my ability, but this research has shown me finding out about related needs students may have that are not tracked or targeted by our existing methods could lead me to seek out some new and more effective ways to address them.

Better informed and ready to seek even more information on reading

Now that this study has come together and I have reflected on it, I think it could be a place to start a conversation with some of my colleagues. I am going to share my findings with

them and ask for their reactions, as well as question them about what they have seen over the years. Do they think middle-school students are reading more or less than they have in the past? Do they see a difference in their reading skills? Do they think technology is a game-changer?

Should we discuss across the subject areas what the reading demands are on our students and how we feel they are managing them? Do we have accurate pictures of these students as readers? Could we get better data? What could we do with it if we did?

Should we be looking at how we measure student reading comprehension and grade level with the SRI? Is it accurate? Should we consider looking for other reading tests?

I think this research has led me to believe these are things worth reviewing and considering. I am going to start researching what free online reading comprehension tools are out there. If I find one that seems usable, I would share it with colleagues for feedback and consider giving it to students and comparing it to SRI results. It could even be a homework assignment for students that may get them talking with their parents about reading. Wouldn't it be fun if parents took the test too?

I believe educational institutions still favor the skilled reader, across the curriculum and all the way up the grades. Avid readers, readers who have put in the hours, have tremendous advantages. They have trained their brains to navigate through words efficiently and to understand more of them. They have trained their brain to fill in the blanks by using effective strategies they may not even be able to consciously articulate; logic skills and questioning skills and critical thinking skills. Their brains have viewed model after model of what properly punctuated text looks like, how dialogue should look, how story structure plays out, how characters go through emotional and intellectual journeys. They understand cause and effect. They are just better thinkers.

Reviewing my own reading life has confirmed much of that for me, but the realization that I perhaps was not the serious reader I fancied myself is also a revelation that I have taken to heart. Despite all the sturm and drang regarding the technology, people at their core don't change as much as we would like to think. Kids are kids. This research has helped me get a better understanding of the middle school reader and middle school reading trends in our district over time and to understand there has not been some wholesale collapse of reading.

By investigating what my middle school students call reading today, I hope to better connect with them to help them develop a love of reading and their reading skills so they can be successful in whatever the world is going to look like in 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50 years.

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