

**Youth Pleasure Reading: an Endangered Pursuit
(and what can be done about it)**

By

William R. Cron, Jr.
SI 624 – Dr. Margaret Taylor
August 15, 2008

I. Introduction

Read! So instructs the popular poster series that has graced the walls of libraries throughout the United States. That simple dictum from the ALA to “Read” reveals a great deal about the importance librarians place on getting young people to invest time in reading books. And they should – research indicates that the manifold benefits of pleasure reading include personal and social development, greater academic achievement, and an increased ability to cope with the demands of an information-rich world. (Clark & Rumbold, 2006) Despite those findings and other studies that show similar benefits, many young people are simply not choosing to read for pleasure. Pleasure reading as a leisure activity is on the decline, and some schools and libraries are doing little to change this pattern.

While deteriorating interest in pleasure reading should be of general concern to parents, teachers, and librarians who work with young people, one group in particular appears to have reached a “critical state.” In keeping with a longstanding pattern, studies show that boys are reading far less than girls of the same age (Hall and Coles 1999, Bauerlein and Stotsky 2005). As the gap between male and female reading scores and favorable attitudes toward reading increase, the lack of pleasure reading among boys assumes added importance.

The paper that follows consists of two main parts. The first is a cursory examination of the primary causes of the decline in pleasure reading. Particular attention is given to the trend among boys. The second part represents a survey of specific strategies that parents, teachers, and librarians can employ to remedy young readers’ movement away from books as a source of enjoyment.

II. Causes for the Decline in Pleasure Reading

The decline in pleasure reading among young people stems from a range of causes. Three of the most significant causes include the availability of alternative forms of entertainment, shifting educational philosophies in schools, and changes in the composition of student populations. Each of these factors is considered in more detail in the paragraphs that follow.

Perhaps the most common explanation for the decline in pleasure reading generally is that potential readers are being drawn away by other, alternative forms of entertainment. Wilson and Casey (2007), for example, posit that the primary cause of the decline in pleasure reading is the widespread availability of other forms of multi-media. Young people who are already the most reluctant to read, such as lower-achieving students or students with language difficulties, find it much easier to choose to pursue other activities outside of the classroom – video games or television in particular – that do not require applied language skills.

Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jonsson (2006) also examined whether new forms of media were contributing to the decline in pleasure reading. They looked at over two decades' worth of data regarding children's reading habits and found that many potential readers are attracted to more "approachable alternatives." Television, video games, and interactive computer technology (the Internet) are increasingly available to would-be readers and tend to attract young people for whom reading is either difficult or, in the case of boys, socially discouraged. In a recent article in *School Library Journal*, Leonard

Sax (2007) echoed this concern, pointing to video games as a principle distraction from “real-world pursuits” like reading.

Shifting educational philosophies in schools are another principal factor contributing to a decline in pleasure reading. Stemming from an increased focus on test scores and basic literacy, schools are doing far less to encourage reading for pleasure. Wilson and Casey (2007) note that programs such as Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) and Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), which have been shown to increase student interest in reading, are being omitted due to the tightening of school schedules. Little time is available to be budgeted for pleasure or “choice” reading. Camp (2007, p. 252) indicates that while teachers are generally good at teaching students “how to read,” they are on the whole not doing an acceptable job of “teaching them to want to read.” This aspect of reading isn’t part of the curriculum, and it loses out in the face of needing to meet state standards. Clark and Akerman (2006) point to these in-school curriculum and teacher effects on pleasure reading as contributing to a negative “school culture,” which drives some students away from reading. Further, in a 2006 study for the British National Literacy Trust, Clark and Rumbold note the irony that although literacy scores in Britain are on the rise, reading for pleasure is on the decline, a trend that is having significant effects on children’s attitudes toward books.

A third essential factor that may explain the general decline in pleasure reading is the shifting composition of the student population in the United States. Schools are more likely than ever to have high numbers of ESL students in their classrooms. These students may find reading to be one of the most difficult of the academic tasks they are being asked to master, leading them to choose academic and non-academic pursuits other than

reading. Further, Clark and Foster (2005) note that because ESL students are more likely to come from poorer families, they are also statistically more likely to read less, enjoy reading less, and receive less encouragement than other students.

III. Strategies to Reverse the Decline in Pleasure Reading

Despite the veritable mountain of research indicating that the level of pleasure reading in this country has reached “critical condition,” the situation is far from hopeless. There are a number of strategies that appear to have the potential for reversing the decline in pleasure reading. In the following sections, I review these available strategies, which I categorize broadly as: instructional (teaching) methods; curriculum and school-level changes; and collection changes.

A. Instructional Methods

Elementary school teacher Linda Cullum (1998) suggests a diagnostic teaching tool known as “think-aloud” to determine where students are having difficulty with reading. She noticed that in her own classroom, often even the brightest and most accomplished students in other areas had difficulty with reading. Those that found reading difficult were also unlikely to find it enjoyable, and did not choose to read for pleasure. Cullum developed a protocol for having students read aloud and talk about texts as they read them. This allowed her to identify areas of difficulty, such as lack of involvement with the text or lack of awareness of grammatical clues, which kept students from understanding the material they were reading. Based on her implementation of the method, students demonstrated increased confidence in their reading and found it more enjoyable as well.

Leonard Sax offers another suggestion for a teaching method that will encourage reluctant readers, specifically boys. Sax (2007) suggests that teachers and school media specialists need to employ a more active style when reading aloud. He recommends a technique he calls “noisytime storytime.” Recognizing that boys in particular are more apt to have a difficult time sitting still for a long amount of time as a direct result of their physiology, Sax suggests that teachers set rules for storytime that are different than what might be considered traditional. Instead of requiring students to sit quietly, they should be allowed to make noise, sit (or stand or lie down) as they please, and be permitted to “tap, rap, and click” as much as they want. The only hard-and-fast rule is that students not bump their neighbors. Sax found that the noisytime-storytime format worked best for an all-boys classroom.

In a 2005 study, Judy Parr and Colleen Maguiness worked with teachers to implement a revised format for Sustained Silent Reading (SSR). Their approach focused on taking the “silent” out of SSR – recognizing that some students, particularly reluctant readers, were able to better engage with texts by talking about them periodically during the reading process. Teachers were encouraged to prepare “book talks,” rosters of questions that they could ask students about their readings. These talks focused on reasons why students chose a particular text, or what elements of it they found most interesting or enjoyable. In the process of considering these questions and talking about the answers, students became more aware of what they actually liked to read, and showed increased satisfaction during their reading times.

Linda Bausch (2007) also pointed to book-talking as a critical factor in helping reluctant readers to understand their reading habits and engage with texts. Bausch found

that boys in particular benefited from talking about what they read, and carried out a case study of a group of third-grade male students who did not enjoy reading. She observed them talking about the books they read in both one-on-one and small-group formats. Students were encouraged to share opinions, discuss the plot, and predict what might happen next. Bausch found that having the students talk about texts allowed her to identify books in which they might be interested – boys showed a general tendency to favor books with action over those that emphasized personal relationships. It also gave her insight into the ways that boys used texts to form “reader identities,” which changed depending on the context of the book-talks (individual vs. group, all-boys vs. mixed). Ultimately, Bausch found that getting boys to talk about texts – and getting teachers to listen – could improve attitudes toward reading and better prepare teachers to meet student needs and interests.

Raymond Kettel drew upon his experience as a storyteller and educator to develop the Storytelling Episode Model (SEM). Kettel noticed that young readers who were reluctant to engage with children’s texts were often attracted to the character and plot development more often associated with novels. He developed a protocol for selecting stand-alone sections of novels that could be presented to students in a storytelling format, in the teacher’s own words rather than read directly from the text. Kettel found that this method exposed students to new genres, challenged them intellectually, and generated interest in reading among students who had not previously shown interest. Students identified with the characters and were brought into the plot.

B. Curriculum and School-Level Changes

Encouraging reading for pleasure does not stop at the classroom level. There are also strategies that can work at the curriculum and school-wide levels. Educational researcher Deanne Camp focused on these types of strategies in a 2007 study, and offered advice on how to develop and maintain the habit of reading in students. Camp believes that teachers should develop and support programs that promote parental involvement and inform parents about their children's literacy skills, as well as offer guidance in how to read with their children. Likewise, teachers can help new pre-service teachers by offering them learning strategies with which they have been successful. To encourage reluctant readers, schools can offer a wide variety of resources in addition to books, such as magazines, newspapers, and websites. Most importantly, teachers can be role models of lifelong reading and learning by themselves continuing to read and by talking about reading with their students.

Literacy researchers Christina Clark and Kate Rumbold (2006) also focused on the "community" aspects of encouraging reading. Clark and Rumbold found that home and school influences strongly affected children's attitudes toward reading. The authors assert that "children and young people who choose to read in their leisure time see themselves as members of a reading community that interacts socially around books and shares a love of reading with at least one family member." Accordingly, teachers should involve parents wherever possible in the process of teaching their children to read – and to find pleasure in reading. Teachers also need to talk to parents about the range of resources that children choose to read at home, and to revise their in-school collections to better represent student interests in terms of resource format and subject matter. Kimberly Lenters echoed these findings in a 2007 study which determined that a young reader's "community" of influences works developmentally to encourage an affinity for pleasure

reading outside of school. Parents who engage their children with texts from an early age, by reading to them/with them, keeping reading level-appropriate books available in the home, and actually modeling desirable reading behavior by reading, have a positive impact on the amount of time the child spent engaged in reading for pleasure.

Focusing on the classroom level of prospective change, Thomas Dee (2007) found that matching students with same-gender teachers can make a difference in students' attitudes toward reading. The author conducted a major longitudinal study which demonstrated that students placed with teachers of their same gender showed not only improved academic performance, but also increased engagement with material. That is to say, they began to take enjoyment in the materials with which they were learning. Students in particular expressed greater satisfaction from the materials they were reading, although the study was not specific to reading. It should be noted that Dee's study focused on teachers and did not include school librarians/media specialists; however, it is reasonable to assume that a similar effect might be demonstrated. Dee attributed the improvements in motivation and performance in students placed with same-gender teachers to, among other things, improved levels of communication. This may be due to the "role model" effect alluded to in the Camp (2007) and Dee (2006) examples above, whereby students appear to benefit from having adults after whom to "model" their reading. When a young person sees an adult acting a certain way, this validates the behavior – when young people see adults reading for pleasure, this serves to mark the behavior as symbolic of maturity. Boys, in particular, lack role models when it comes to reading for pleasure.

C. Collection Changes

Yet another general area where educators can make changes that positively impact student attitudes toward pleasure reading is in the contents of their classroom/media center collections. Educational researchers (and practicing teachers) Janell Wilson and Linda Casey (2007) conducted research confirming their belief that “teachers need to know what students are doing outside of the classroom to better motivate students in the classroom.” Giving students a wide variety of choices in what to read lets them take control of their own learning, and shows benefits in terms of the amount of reading students choose to do for pleasure. Boys especially express frustration with the materials available to them, and teachers need to ensure that there are texts of interest on-hand for this at-risk group of reluctant readers. One way of doing so is to broaden their understanding of what constitutes “academic” texts, introducing materials like magazines and manuals into their collections to better reflect what boys are choosing to read at home.

These findings were similar to those of Colleen MacDonell, who in a 2004 study found that a large school library and the option for student to choose their own material were among the most important strategies for generating interest in reading among reluctant readers. Students, argues MacDonell, should be exposed to a “book-rich environment” which encourages reading for pleasure both in and out of school. They should also have so many choices at their disposal because their interests and backgrounds vary widely.

Finally, Philip Crawford (2004) suggests a specific collection modification that educators can make to draw in reluctant readers. Graphic novels, observes Crawford, offer a visually-rich alternative to text-heavy books that might overwhelm readers with

language difficulties without sacrificing plot and character development. This format is very popular among boys, and often features subject matter in which boys have expressed interest, such as fantasy and action. Moreover, graphic novels are often serialized and therefore encourage continued reading over several books.

IV. Conclusion

It is clear that there is no “magic bullet” for reversing the decline in pleasure reading. The trend is pervasive, particularly among boys. Yet the above analysis should demonstrate that there are measures which teachers, media specialists, and parents can take to encourage pleasure reading among these groups. By altering teaching methods, revising curricula, and making changes to media center collections, educators can make a unified effort to get kids reading for pleasure and, more importantly, to change negative attitudes about books and learning. This will have a meaningful impact on their students’ education and their lives.

List of Works Cited

Bausch, Linda S. 2007. Boy-Talk around Texts: Considering How a Third Grade Boy Transforms the Shape of Literacy in Book Talk Discussions. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. 7(2):199-218.

Camp, Deanne. 2007. Who's Reading and Why: Reading Habits of 1st Grade through Graduate Students. *Reading Horizons*. 47(3):251-268.

Clark, Christina and Akerman, Rodie. 2006. Social Inclusion and Reading: An Exploration. English Document (ED) 11, National Literacy Trust, report accessed via ERIC online database, document accession number ED496345, 18 September 2007.

Clark, Christina & Foster, A. 2005. Children's and young people's reading habits and preferences: The who, what, why, where and when. London: National Literacy Trust, report accessed via ERIC online database, 22 September 2006.

Clark, Christina and Rumbold, Kate. 2006. Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview. English Document (ED) 35, National Literacy Trust, report accessed via ERIC online database, document accession number ED496343, 18 September 2007.

Crawford, Philip. Feb. 2004. A Novel Approach: Using Graphic Novels to Attract Reluctant Readers and Promote Literacy. *Library Media Connection*. 22(5):26-28.

Cullum, Linda. 1998. Encouraging the Reluctant Reader: Using a Think-Aloud Protocol to Discover Strategies for Reading Success. English Document (ED) 15, National Literacy Trust, report accessed via ERIC online database, document accession number ED420837, 19 October 2006.

Dee, Thomas S. 2007. Teachers and the Gender Gaps in Student Achievement. *Journal of Human Resources*. 42(3):528-554.

Johnsson-Smaragdi, Ulla and Jonsson, Annelis. 2006. Book Reading in Leisure Time: Long-Term Changes in Young Peoples' Book Reading Habits. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*. 50(5):519-540.

Kettel, Raymond P. Winter-Spring 1994. Motivating the Reluctant Reader: Using the Storytelling Episode Model. *Storytelling World*. 3(1):31-33.

Lenters, Kim. 2007. From Storybooks to Games, Comics, Bands, and Chapter Books: A Young Boy's Appropriation of Literacy Practices. *Canadian Journal of Education*. 30(1):113-136.

MacDonell, Colleen. 2004. Making the Case for Pleasure Reading. *Teacher Librarian*. 31(4):30.

Parr, Judy M. and Maguiness, Colleen. October 2005. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. 49(2):98-107.

Sax, Leonard. 2007. The Boy Problem. *School Library Journal*. September 2007:40-43.

Wilson, Janell D. and Casey, Linda H. 2007. Understanding the Recreational Reading Patterns of Secondary Students. *Reading Improvement*. 44(1):40-49.