

**The Impact of Assigned Reading on Reading Pleasure in Young Adults**

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## **Abstract**

This research presents the results of a survey of 833 U.S. adolescents, ages twelve to eighteen years old. It was hypothesized that teachers are assigning reading (rather than students self-selecting books) and that this leads to dissatisfaction with reading. Additional factors (gender, age, and self-identification as a reader) were also examined for their influence on reading satisfaction. The results indicate that approximately one-third of the respondents were allowed to select books for school reading assignments and that self-selection had a statistical impact on their self-perceived reading pleasure. Limitations include geographic location, a non-random sample, and data collection by various surveyors. This study adds to the growing body of research showing that student self-selection of reading materials leads to greater pleasure and interest in reading.

## **Introduction**

Teens aren't reading anymore.<sup>1</sup> Teens are reading.<sup>2</sup> Teens are reading differently.<sup>3</sup> While there is controversy regarding teens and their reading habits, there is one time when educators would like to assume that teens *are* reading: during school-assigned reading. This study presents findings on how adolescents, twelve to eighteen years old, self-report their pleasure or displeasure with the last book they read for school. In addition, it examines factors that might influence their reported

satisfaction, such as whether or not they were able to choose the book themselves and whether or not they self-identify as a reader.

## **Literature on Assigned Reading with Teens**

### *The Reading Decline*

Studies on the reading habits of children and teens have shown that reading begins to decrease around the ages of thirteen and fourteen.<sup>4</sup> In one study of students in first through sixth grades, the decline in attitude toward academic reading was evident even in the youngest readers.<sup>5</sup> In Gallo's study of 3,339 students in fourth through twelfth grades, the decline in reading satisfaction with assigned reading was evident in both remedial and advanced students, and the level of dissatisfaction increased as grade level went up.<sup>6</sup> However, there is some evidence that this decline may be attenuated by self-selection, which increases positive feelings about reading.<sup>7</sup>

### *Impacts on School Reading: Choice*

In 1999, *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement for the Commission on Adolescent Literacy (CAL) of the International Reading Association* put forth seven principles for advancing adolescents' literacy. The first principle is that "adolescents deserve access to a variety of reading material that they can and want to read." Being able to select their reading material is an essential act of independence for adolescents. "All adolescents, and especially those who struggle with reading, deserve opportunities to select age-appropriate materials they can manage and topics and genres they prefer."<sup>8</sup> An Australian study of teens reported on "the fundamental role of choice in students' enjoyment of and motivation for reading," especially for males.<sup>9</sup> When comparing books that students selected for themselves with the ones assigned by teachers,

students said that books they chose for themselves contained “more violence, were funnier, scarier, more realistic” versus the school choices, which were “boring, harder to read, too dry, written in an antiquated style, too ‘prissy,’ or ‘dumb.’”<sup>10</sup> Self-selected books were also more likely to have teen characters, unlike the classics and teacher-selected books, which tend to feature adult characters.

Middle-school students—typically known as being resistant to reading and for having negative attitudes about reading—are often assigned teacher-selected class novels.<sup>11</sup> Students “are expected to become independent readers, yet they get limited opportunities to explore their own interests in reading, to read at their own pace, or to make their own decisions about whether or not to read a book.”<sup>12</sup> A survey of over 1,700 sixth-grade students suggests that for many of these students (42%), motivation to read was tied to students being able to choose what they read and having good choices available.<sup>13</sup> These students’ most negative experiences were “directly related to assigned reading,” which they found difficult to understand and boring.<sup>14</sup> “Clearly, something happens to the reading experience of young people to make it seem a lot less enjoyable when they reach secondary school than it was in primary school.”<sup>15</sup> But this can be turned around, as shown in a case study of 53 eighth-grade students.<sup>16</sup> Teachers were able to meet the curriculum requirements using student self-selection; they found that when “students were provided time in school to choose books, read them, and reflect on them, they became more interested in reading and connected characters and themes in their favorite texts to their own lives in meaningful ways.”<sup>17</sup>

### *Impacts on School Reading: Treatment and Topic*

In addition to teachers’ reading choices being less interesting to teens, their treatment of the material plays a role in teens’ dissatisfaction with assigned reading. Cope’s survey of almost 300

high school seniors reported that school reading experiences were often negative due to the assigned-reading experience, especially when coupled with students' additional disdain for writing book reports and what they perceive as the over analysis of books.<sup>18</sup> Students had trouble making sense of the teacher-assigned books, found them difficult to read and boring, and could not figure out how the books related to their lives or future success. During the process of teaching classics, teachers teach complex literary structures and concepts, limiting student enjoyment and personal connection. Along with assigned reading, the lengthy over analysis of literature is tied to students' negative school experience,<sup>19</sup> which is compounded by students' inability to "independently access the knowledge and information embedded in the books and other printed materials that are part of a curriculum."<sup>20</sup> This is often due in part to teachers assigning books that are written for adults and beyond students' cognitive level.<sup>21</sup>

### *Impacts on School Reading: Gender*

In Nippold, Duthie, and Larsen's study of 200 older children and young adolescents, reading for pleasure was only moderately popular and declined as age increased, with boys showing a marked difference from girls on time spent reading for pleasure.<sup>22</sup> Girls read more often for pleasure and outperformed boys on standardized tests of reading literacy.<sup>23</sup> Teacher choices and a mismatch with the interests and needs of boys compounded their negative experience and negative reading attitude.<sup>24</sup> Assigned school reading is not representative of boys' interests and their "real life," and the books were considered "boring, difficult, and off point."<sup>25</sup> While teachers tend to select narrative fiction that is of little interest to boys, studies show that providing students the freedom to choose their own reading materials contributes to an increase in positive feelings about reading.<sup>26</sup>

### *Literature Review Conclusion*

Research indicates that there is a definite theme of student dissatisfaction or “concern about the texts they are required or ‘forced’ to read in the classroom,”<sup>27</sup> and that this dissatisfaction is connected to the decline in reading.<sup>28</sup> Teachers may be aware that research shows that self-selection is important; however, finding “enough time to provide regular opportunities for reading self-selected texts during language arts time or to read along with their students” is difficult in light of time required for skills teaching and preparing students for statewide tests, as well as the pressure on teachers to increase students’ scores on these mandatory tests.<sup>29</sup>

## **Purpose of the Study and Overview of Methods**

The purpose of this study is to determine if adolescents are choosing their own reading in the school setting and if the following have an impact on students’ reported satisfaction with the books they read for school: self-selected versus teacher-assigned reading, gender, self-identification as a reader, and age. This research presents statistical analysis of a survey of 833 adolescents, ages twelve to eighteen years. It is important to note that some surveys had missing data, so depending on the statistical test being used and the variable being tested, the total count ranges from 833 to 806.

### *Research Questions and Hypotheses*

**RQ1:** Are teens being allowed to self-select assigned reading?

**H1:** It is hypothesized that adolescent students are not being allowed to select their own reading.

**RQ2:** Which of the following factors affect satisfaction: self-selected versus teacher-assigned books, gender, identification as a reader, age?

**H2:** It is hypothesized that self-selection, gender, identification as a reader, and age will all affect satisfaction with reading. It is anticipated that self-selection will lead to greater reported satisfaction. It is also anticipated that females, identified readers, and younger readers will be more satisfied with the books they read for school, whether self-selected or teacher-assigned.

### *Methods*

Surveys can be used to identify the subjective feelings of a population and to gather these feelings into quantifiable data.<sup>30</sup> Surveys are especially appropriate when data is not available by other means, such as in existing reports. Previous studies have used surveys to assess teens' reading habits and attitudes.<sup>31</sup> This survey is not a random sample of adolescent readers; it is a convenience sample. It can be difficult to make inferences about the population of interest in convenience samples because of selection bias. The selection bias in this instance was mitigated to some extent by using a variety of sampling locations—for example, churches, parks, malls, etc.—but the results are not intended to be read as strictly generalizable to the full U.S. adolescent student population.

### *Survey Sample*

Adolescents twelve to eighteen years old were surveyed on their reading habits and their responses to the last book read for school. The survey was conducted by graduate students in LIS 226 Young Adult Literature and Related Resources at St. John's University. In addition to Responsible Code of Conduct training, the surveyors were provided with a script (appendix A) and training. Internal Review Board permission was granted to have the adolescent respondents give their own informed consent versus parental consent so that participants could provide honest answers. Additionally, to prevent bias toward finding “readers,” the interviewers did not

seek respondents from schools or libraries. No identifying information was collected, except for age and gender, and the adolescents were approached in public settings like churches, malls, parks, and so on, if they appeared to be within the age range (12–18). Age was the only criterion for participation. No one was excluded based on race, beliefs, gender, or socioeconomic status. The survey took approximately three to five minutes. There was no penalty if potential participants declined or stopped after starting. The following independent variables were collected: location, gender, age, and self-identified as a reader or non-reader. Dependent variables included the following: self-selected reading versus teacher-assigned reading and response to the last book read. Participants also provided the titles of the last school-required book and the last thing they read for fun. They were allowed to provide additional comments. Regression analysis and chi-square tests of significance were used to assess the relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

### *Results*

Eight hundred thirty-three teens in the New York Tri-State area responded to the survey in the fall of 2009. Table 1 details the ages of the respondents: 323 respondents were male, 504 were females, and 6 did not report their gender.

#### **RQ1:** Are teens being allowed to self-select assigned reading?

To address the research question regarding whether or not teachers are allowing teens to self-select their required reading, survey respondents were asked: “What was the name of the last book you read for a school assignment? Did you get to pick it?” The survey results indicate that 71.3%, or 581 of the students, reported that their reading was assigned by the teacher. Just 234 (28.7%) of the students were able to self-select their reading. The hypothesis that teachers were



more likely to assign reading rather than allow students to self-select was accepted for this group of participants. These results are graphically displayed in figure 1.

**RQ2:** Which of the following factors affect satisfaction: self-selected versus teacher-assigned books, gender, identification as a reader, age?

To address whether or not allowing self-selection results in higher rates of positive experiences with reading, a simple cross tabulation of self-reported reading experience and self-selection versus teacher-assigned reading was conducted. Given the existing literature, it was hypothesized that students who self-selected required school readings would rate the experience more positively than those who read teacher-assigned books. As indicated by the results in table 2, teens reported more positive experiences when they were allowed to self-select their reading material. Of the 234 students who were allowed to self-select their reading material, 41.0% (96 students) responded that they loved the book they read. In contrast, only 21.3% (124 students) of those who were assigned reading reported that they loved the book they read. A chi-square test was also conducted to test for statistical significance in self-reported positive experiences between self-selection and teacher-assigned reading. The results reveal a Pearson  $\chi^2(3)$  of 49.65 ( $p = 0.000$ ). Thus, the difference between reported reading pleasure across students who were assigned reading versus those who self-selected was statistically significant.

The existing literature points out that gender, age, and self-identifying as a reader are also factors that affect experiences with reading. The Pearson  $\chi^2(3)$  of 4.53 ( $p = 0.210$ ) found in table 3 indicates that there was not a statistically significant difference across genders. The Pearson  $\chi^2(6)$  of 21.07 ( $p = 0.002$ ) in table 5 demonstrates that there was a statistically significant difference in self-reported positive experiences across reading frequency or self-

identification as a reader. Unlike in previous studies found in the literature, the Pearson  $\chi^2(24)$  of 34.54 ( $p = 0.076$ ) in table 4 shows that there was not a statistically significant difference in reported positive experiences across ages. These descriptive statistics yield mixed support for the findings in the current body of literature, with self-identification as a reader being linked to positive experiences, while age and gender are not.

It was anticipated that females would be more likely to self-identify as readers and to report satisfaction in both types of school reading—self-selected and teacher-assigned. In this study, teens who responded that they read at least once a week were classified as readers; 70% of the respondents fell into this category. Teens reading less frequently (once a month, once a school term, once a year, or never) were classified as non-readers. Previous studies find that gender plays a role in being a reader; however, in this study of the participants reporting both gender and reading frequency, of the 323 male participants, 69% identified as a reader, and 71% of the 500 females identified as a reader.

In order to assess the relationship between self-selection and reading pleasure—while controlling for the influences of gender, self-identification as a reader, and age—an ordinary least squares regression model was estimated. The sample size for the estimation is 806 since 10 respondents had missing information. The results from the OLS regression model (table 6) indicate that the overall model is statistically significant and that all but one of the hypotheses can be accepted. Gender and self-identification as a reader had a statistically significant effect on reading pleasure. Even after controlling for gender, age, and self-identification as a reader, there was still a statistically significant effect for self-selection versus teacher-assigned reading. Students who were allowed to self-select their reading material were more likely to say that they enjoyed their book. In addition, the results confirm findings from the previous literature that

females are more likely to self-report pleasure in reading than males and that self-identified readers are more likely than others to self-report pleasure in their last book. In this sample, age was the only variable tested that did not have a statistically significant effect on reading pleasure.

### *Limitations*

Due to the limited geographic location, the New York Tri-State area, and the fact that the sample was not random, the work described here cannot provide definitive answers or be used to make generalizations to students outside the area. Another limitation is that the consistency of data collection was dependent on the graduate students following the design protocol exactly. Additionally, this survey only sought information on the last book that students had read for school and if it was teacher-assigned or self-selected. It did not take into account that some teachers might use a combination approach—alternating teacher-assigned books with student-selected books.

### *Implications*

Despite the recommendation of the Commission on Adolescent Literacy (CAL) as far back as 1999 that students benefit from being able to select their own reading as a means of advancement for adolescent literacy, this study demonstrates that students are still being assigned reading by teachers and that it still negatively affects their enjoyment and views of reading. Studies have also shown that as reading increases, vocabulary increases.<sup>32</sup> “Reading is a prime source of word exposure, particularly for complex and low-frequency words, and there is evidence from research that the amount of time spent reading is closely associated with word learning.” It makes sense then that reading be promoted as “a school-based activity” and as a “leisure-time activity.”<sup>33</sup> Proponents of self-selected school reading understand that this can help students build a lifelong

love of reading; however, opponents point out the loss of literary culture and the feasibility of teaching as many as thirty different books to thirty students.<sup>34</sup>

As far back as 1997, Cope was advocating:

If we want students to grow as readers and develop a lifelong love of reading, then we must trust them to choose literature that they can connect with, literature that will inspire them to read more. Whether we take the small step of allowing students to choose their reading from lists we provide or the giant step of a reading workshop format, we need to relinquish the stranglehold we have on our students reading.<sup>35</sup>

Twelve years later, the *New York Times* ran an article about a reading workshop built around teacher-to-student discussion, student-to-student discussion, and student reading journals.<sup>36</sup> Rich reported that many places were trying this new form of school reading—including Chicago; Jonesboro, Georgia; New York City—and that even though the literature shows that allowing students to self-select titles for assigned reading is beneficial, there is still need for improvement. My study shows that less than one-third of the students surveyed were allowed to pick their own school reading. It also supports the idea that allowing students to self-select reading increases their motivation to read, which in turn increases their engagement with reading material.<sup>37</sup> Better-engaged students means more learning and better reading comprehension.

As far back as 1998, Worthy, Moorman, and Turner showed that self-selected reading improves reading attitude and achievement, and they made suggestions for making self-selected reading with guidance from teachers more common in classroom settings. Fifty-seven percent of the teachers in the study taught using student-selected novels.<sup>38</sup> Not only were students allowed

to select the books, but they were also in many cases given the freedom to pick how they responded to the book (e.g., creative activities, diaries, etc.). Students can still be taught how to “infer theme, predict resolutions, identify figurative language and so on” with self-selected books.<sup>39</sup>

Modeling reading, sharing books with students, and giving students opportunities to share their choices are instrumental components of encouraging reading. In the case of this research, self-selection had a significant effect on whether or not students enjoyed the books they read for school. Since most students have access to classroom and school libraries, it is important that these collections appeal to their reading interests and offer a variety of resources to support self-selection.

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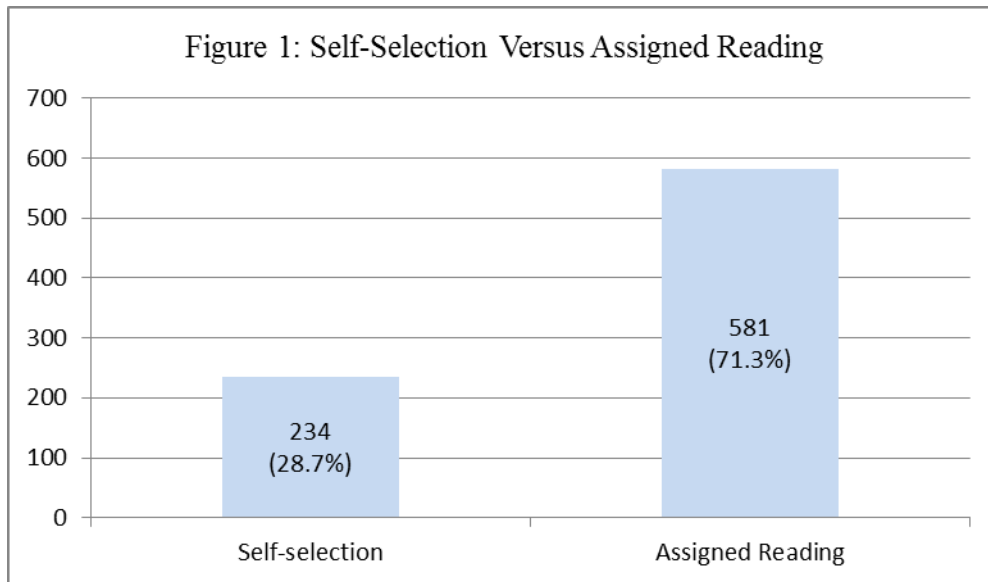


Table 1: Respondents by Age

<b>No. of Respondents</b>	<b>Age</b>
4 (0.5%)	Not reported but confirmed in the age range
5 (0.6%)	12 years old
191 (22.9%)	13 years old
126 (15.1%)	14 years old
140 (16.8%)	15 years old
164 (19.7%)	16 years old
126 (15.1%)	17 years old
77 (9.2%)	18 years old
833 (100%)	Total

Table 2: Cross Tabulation of Self-Selected and Teacher-Assigned Books with Reading

Experience

	Loved Book	Liked Book	Neutral	Hated Book	Total
Self-selected	96 (41.0%)	111 (47.4%)	26 (11.1%)	1 (0.4%)	234 (100%)
Teacher-assigned	124 (21.3%)	308 (53.0%)	86 (14.8%)	63 (10.8%)	581 (100%)
Total	220 (27.0%)	419 (51.4%)	112 (13.7%)	64 (7.9%)	815 (100%)

*Note:* Percentages reflect the row values.

Pearson  $\chi^2(3) = 49.65$  ( $p = 0.000$ )

Table 3: Cross Tabulation of Gender with Reading Experience

	Loved Book	Liked Book	Neutral	Hated Book	Total
Male	72 (22.8%)	168 (53.2%)	48 (15.2%)	28 (8.9%)	316 (100%)
Female	146 (29.3%)	251 (50.3%)	63 (12.6%)	39 (7.8%)	499 (100%)
Total	218 (26.7%)	419 (51.4%)	111 (13.6%)	67 (8.2%)	815 (100%)

*Note:* Percentages reflect the row values.

Pearson  $\chi^2(3) = 4.53$  ( $p = 0.210$ )

Table 4: Cross Tabulation of Age with Reading Experience

Age	Loved Book	Liked Book	Neutral	Hated Book	Total
11	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100%)
12	1 (25.0%)	2 (50.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (25.0%)	4 (100%)
13	64 (33.7%)	94 (49.5%)	20 (10.5%)	12 (6.3%)	190 (100%)
14	30 (24.0%)	61 (48.8%)	26 (20.8%)	8 (6.4%)	125 (100%)
15	28 (20.7%)	77 (57.0%)	15 (11.1%)	15 (11.1%)	135 (100%)
16	39 (24.1%)	83 (51.2%)	26 (16.1%)	14 (8.6%)	162 (100%)
17	34 (27.2%)	63 (50.4%)	15 (12.0%)	13 (10.4%)	125 (100%)
18	23 (30.7%)	40 (53.3%)	8 (10.7%)	4 (5.3%)	75 (100%)
19	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (100%)
Total	219 (26.8%)	420 (51.3%)	112 (13.7%)	67 (8.2%)	818 (100%)

*Note:* Percentages reflect the row values.

Pearson  $\chi^2(24) = 34.54$  ( $p = 0.076$ )

Table 5: Cross Tabulation of Reading Frequency (Self-Identified Reader) with Reading Experience

	Loved Book	Liked Book	Neutral	Hated Book	Total
Less than once a month	65 (25.5%)	115 (45.1%)	40 (15.7%)	35 (13.7%)	255 (100%)
Once a month	39 (23.8%)	94 (57.3%)	24 (14.6%)	7 (4.3%)	164 (100%)
Once a week	117 (29.1%)	212 (52.7%)	48 (11.9%)	25 (6.2%)	402 (100%)
Total	221 (26.9%)	421 (51.3%)	112 (13.6%)	67 (8.2%)	821 (100%)

*Note:* Percentages reflect the row values.

Pearson  $\chi^2(6) = 21.07$  ( $p = 0.002$ )

Table 6: Ordinary Least Squares Regression Predicting Self-Reported Reading Pleasure

No. of Observations	806		
F (4, 801)	15.5		
Prob > F	0.000		
Adj. R-square	0.012		
	Coef.	t-statistic	P >  t
Self-Selection vs. Teacher- Assigned	0.455	6.93	0.000
Gender	0.132	2.22	0.027
Age	0.016	0.36	0.356
Reading Frequency	0.101	3.06	0.002
Constant	1.153	4.28	0.000



## Appendix A

Script: “Hey! I’m \_\_\_ and I’m taking a course in Young Adult Literature at St. John’s University. One of my assignments requires me to survey people from twelve to eighteen years of age about reading. Are you in that age category? [Continue if they respond “yes”; stop and thank them if they respond “no.”] Would you be interested in taking this survey? It only takes a couple of minutes and is completely anonymous and pain free. If you don’t want to, that’s okay; and if you decide to but change your mind in the middle, that’s okay too. [If they ask why you want to know about their reading habits—explain that the survey and research will help librarians understand what types of books and materials we need to buy to better serve people their age.]