

# PROFILES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL READERS

CONCERTED ACTION TO SUPPORT  
READING RESEARCH





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# PROFILES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL READERS

In order to determine young adolescents' interest in reading and to propose explanations for their reading behaviours, a team of researchers evaluated the importance for young people of reading outside mandatory academic activities. The study shed light on the reasons why adolescents like reading, and made it possible to provide a profile of secondary school readers that takes their reading habits into account. The conclusions of the study indicate significant relationships between the students' motivation to read, their reading behaviours and their reading skills.

## WHAT DO ADOLESCENTS READ?<sup>1</sup>

It appears that young people are most interested in comic books and adventure and mystery novels. They say they prefer romantic, original, brave, funny, bold and adventurous characters. The subject matter, the cover and the synopsis have considerable influence on their choice of reading matter. Adolescents also read newspapers and magazines, but they are less likely to read texts found on the Web.

Surveys conducted by researchers in Québec reveal that girls read more books and magazines over the course of a month, that they read more often and for longer periods and that they tend to select longer books. Boys read more on-screen than girls, particularly when playing games and using CD-ROMs. They also prefer comic books and humour and are more interested than girls in science fiction, scientific information and the sports pages in newspapers.

In school, adolescents read textbooks and texts and, less often, other kinds of books. Newspapers are virtually absent from the curriculum for many students.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, the results presented are drawn from the following two studies:

M. Lebrun, *Devenir compétent en lecture au secondaire*. Final report. Concerted action of Fonds FCAR-CQRS-MCC-MEQ-MFE, Programme pour le soutien à la recherche en lecture, Université du Québec à Montréal, 2003. The report is available at the following Web site: <<http://www.fqrsq.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/index>>.

M. Théorêt, "Les habitudes de lecture des adolescents et adolescentes," in *Étude longitudinale et transversale des conditions scolaires favorables au développement des habitudes et des compétences en lecture chez les élèves du secondaire*. Final report. Concerted action of Fonds FCAR-CQRS-MCC-MEQ-MFE, Programme pour le soutien à la recherche en lecture, Université de Montréal, 2004. The report is available at the following Web site: <<http://www.fqrsq.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/index>>.

## WHAT ARE THEIR READING HABITS?

These studies<sup>2</sup> reveal that adolescents spend little of their free time reading, compared with the time they spend watching television. Overall, the researchers noted that adolescents' activities mostly involve watching television, going out with friends and doing homework.

In terms of reading practices, on-line chatting is a very popular activity among young people. They also browse the Web and visit their favourite sites, citing the Internet as their preferred means of finding information. Contrary to popular belief, however, they do not appear to be "hooked" on computers or to spend all their free time on-line.

Girls appear to read more than boys. According to the researchers, generally speaking, girls have better reading habits with respect to intensity and variety: they read more, more often and in a wider variety of types of material and contexts than boys. Almost half of the girls said they can read for an hour without getting bored, while almost half of the boys said they would not like to have more time to read and do not find reading restful or relaxing. Fifty per cent more boys than girls read no books in the course of the month and almost never read during their free time. Also, half of the young people never ask their teachers for reading suggestions.

The young people state that a number of factors make it easier to read, including a quiet, comfortable place to read, an abundance of reading material they find appealing and the freedom to choose what they read. Young readers talk a lot about what they read and make suggestions to their friends. Finally, the young people don't believe that the best students are those that read the most, and do not consider themselves more avid readers than adults.

The adolescents said that good readers must like to read, must easily understand what they read and must be able to concentrate. They also mentioned the importance of having interesting books at their disposal and a good imagination. Slightly more than half the adolescents questioned consider themselves average readers and almost half said they had a moderate interest in reading. Most of the girls questioned were very or somewhat interested in reading, while most of the boys were somewhat or not very interested.

The researchers also questioned the students' parents about their children's reading habits. Most of them said that they knew what sorts of books or magazines their children read and that they talked about them at home. Half the parents said that their children read regularly, while a few said that they read little if at all. However, the researchers believe that the parents' answers may have been influenced by their desire to look good.

2. See note 1.



## WHY DO ADOLESCENTS READ?

According to the researchers, motivation to read is the result of the students' perceptions of themselves as readers and of the value they place on reading.

In terms of motivation, adolescents read mainly to fantasize, escape, look for information, improve their culture and, especially, to pass the time, and not with a view to improving their academic performance.

A gender-differentiated analysis revealed that girls like reading more than boys do and that they have a more positive self-image.<sup>3</sup> They are more likely than boys to get positive feedback about their reading skills from family, peers and teachers, and they feel good when they read. Boys get less pleasure out of reading than girls and are more anxious about it. They also appear to receive less encouragement than girls from the people around them.

According to the researchers, the perception of less support from people around them may have a negative effect on boys' attitudes toward reading.

Girls place more value on reading. They are more likely to satisfy their curiosity by reading than boys, thereby better fulfilling their need for escape and fantasy. They also aim at higher goals than boys in terms of academic performance and reading and have more positive perceptions of reading. Generally speaking, boys appear to be less interested in reading.

In this respect, the researchers point out that, the more interested students are in a school subject or activity, the more they will participate and persevere, despite any difficulties encountered.

The researchers also state that the more education adolescents have, the more they compare themselves positively with their peers in terms of reading skills and the less they are interested in improving these skills.

3. R. Chouinard, "Les perceptions de soi comme lecteur et la valeur attribuée à la lecture d'élèves du début de secondaire issus de milieux populaires," in *Étude longitudinale et transversale des conditions scolaires favorables au développement des habitudes et des compétences en lecture chez les élèves du secondaire*. Final report. Concerted action of Fonds FCAR-CQRS-MCC-MEQ-MFE, Programme pour le soutien à la recherche en lecture, 2004, p. 17 to 24. The report is available at the following Web site: <<http://www.fqrcs.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/index1.html>>.

## TYPES OF READERS

The researchers identified different types of readers and came up with different profiles for boys and girls:

Girls	Boys
<b>"Avid"</b> : reads everywhere, all the time	<b>"Enthusiastic"</b> : reads everything, very quickly
<b>"Impulsive"</b> : browses through a number of books	<b>"Budding psychosociologist"</b> : is interested in human and social issues
<b>"Selective"</b> : is interested in current events, is aware of her preferences, chooses her own books	<b>"Sociable"</b> : likes discussion and discovering new things
<b>"Dreamer"</b> : creates an atmosphere, escapes in novels	<b>"Athlete"</b> : reads when he has to
<b>"Active"</b> : is too busy to read for pleasure, is interested in current events	<b>"Solitary hedonist"</b> : likes beautiful books and rereading his favourite authors
<b>"Busy"</b> : likes only magazines, since she has a lot of activities	<b>"Resistant"</b> : does not like to read, but can do so after a fashion
	<b>"Defiant"</b> : refuses to read

According to the researchers, the differences among the types of readers should be taken into consideration.

Note that "resistant" readers are stimulated very little by assigned readings and are more at ease with short texts related to their fields of interest. For them, reading requires a significant effort of concentration. Faced with texts that are not adapted to their skills, they develop avoidance strategies.

It appears that even readers considered to be resistant do not lose contact with the written word. According to the researchers, it is very important to maintain this relationship, however tenuous it might be.

## LIBRARY VISITS

The researchers report that almost 20 per cent of the young people surveyed borrow books from the municipal library. They do not visit the school library as often, however, and there are significant differences between school libraries, particularly with respect to the resources available. The number of books, magazines and multimedia documents available in a school library does not appear to be related to the number of students attending the school. The researchers also noted that certain types of materials are unavailable in certain school libraries. This is particularly true of plays. Only very few of the libraries visited had any newspapers, and multimedia documents were not always available. However, all of the libraries had a selection of comic books.



Most teachers in the schools visited believe that the books in the school library correspond more or less to their students' fields of interest. Most of them think that they are more or less appropriate, given the objectives of their program, and believe that there are not enough books related to the subject they teach. Also, it appears that there are not enough copies of novels. Finally, most teachers believe that their library could be better stocked and that important materials are lacking.

Most students live in a place with a school or municipal library. However, they often use the school library for reasons other than finding or borrowing books, i.e. to do their homework.

According to the researchers, now more than ever, a close relationship between the school and the library is needed to revitalize reading as a cultural practice.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- These surveys reveal that adolescents have specific reading preferences.

According to the researchers, this should be taken into consideration in the development of effective and diverse strategies for helping students to understand increasingly demanding materials, such as those presented in the new programs of study.

In their opinion, innovative instructional support focusing on both the students' feelings and their intellect could help students deal with increasingly difficult materials.

- It appears that light reading is the most common type of reading among secondary school students. However, adolescents' reading is fuelled by curiosity and the desire to fantasize: according to the researchers, this should be taken into consideration.

In order to narrow the gap between assigned reading and reading for pleasure, the researchers suggest finding a more even mix between literary works and informative texts, and more systematically finding informative texts on the Web.

- They also state that boys would benefit from instruction using reading materials that are more closely related to their interests. The surveys confirm that boys, particularly in poorer areas, are at risk of experiencing difficulties and should receive more support.
- There appears to be a relationship, although not absolute, between students' reading skills and the variety of reading contexts.

By "reading contexts," the researchers mean places where the students can read, sources of reading materials, suggested reading, types of reading, times for reading and, lastly, reading interests. In fact, the better the students' reading skills, the greater the number of reading contexts, and the greater the number of reading contexts, the better the students' reading skills.

Performance is also related to the intensity of reading, i.e. the number of books students read, how often they read, how much free time they devote to reading, how long they read and the length of the books. The best reading habits are related to better performance in reading. There does not, however, appear to be a relationship between reading skills and how often the students read on a computer monitor.

- In order to support students, the researchers suggest increasing the quality and quantity of feedback, emphasizing the progress made by the students as a group and individually.

They also suggest encouraging students to record this feedback in checklists or portfolios. Lastly, they suggest helping students to set realistic objectives by defining new reading challenges with the students.

It is also important, in their opinion, to associate reading with positive emotions by providing pleasant and relaxing reading experiences that do not involve any type of evaluation.

## Methodology

A preliminary study<sup>4</sup> on reading habits and attitudes toward reading was conducted with 2700 Secondary I to Secondary IV students in two regions: Shawinigan, in the Mauricie region, and Montréal. The aim was to identify the factors and conditions promoting better teaching strategies for reading and to ensure the development of sustainable reading practices.


The researchers also conducted a second study in order to create a profile of libraries in secondary schools. They surveyed 10 people in charge of school libraries, five school administrators and 18 teachers, most of them in comprehensive schools on the Island of Montréal. Only three of the schools were located outside the metropolitan area: two on the south shore and one in the Outaouais.

In another survey,<sup>5</sup> more than 1109 Secondary I to Secondary III students from disadvantaged areas answered a series of questions about their reading habits at the beginning and at the end of the school year. The study<sup>6</sup> also examined the evolution of attitudes toward reading among 78 Secondary I to Secondary III students in regular and special classes in three Montréal schools located in disadvantaged areas.

4. Lebrun.

5. Théorêt.

6. Chouinard, p. 17 to 24.



**The document is available at the following Web site:**  
**[www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/publications/menu-rapports.htm](http://www.mels.gouv.qc.ca/publications/menu-rapports.htm)**

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