Motivating High School Students to Read
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Introduction
There is no doubt about it; people seem to be reading less these days. For whatever reason, whether it be TV, computers or other media, the general public is able to access information through hearing and seeing rather than reading. Why read the newspaper when you can get headlines online as soon as you get to work? This is what some students might say too when you ask them why they don’t read; they don’t really need to, etc. But the reality is, we do need to read. Despite our high-speed, E-book, Internet-crazy world, reading is essential to learning, whether you do it from a computer screen or the daily paper over your morning cup of coffee.

In addition to thinking they might not need to read, students also report that reading is boring. That could be true for average readers but most likely, these “bored” readers find reading to be difficult. Reading is a complex, whole-brain process that requires the use of a wide range of skills. No wonder they think it’s difficult; it is! The scary part is that if they didn’t learn to read or learn to read well, reading in high school can be a very challenging and frustrating obstacle.

Focus
At Falls Church High School in Falls Church, Virginia, I conducted a small study to get a feeling for just how much students at the school were reading outside that which was required for their courses. I hypothesized of course that the results would show that the students weren’t reading very much. My hypothesis was right; they aren’t.

Method
100 students, mostly from my foreign language classes, were given a short survey asking how much they read. The survey included questions like, “Do you read the cereal box in the morning when eating breakfast?” or “Are you faithful to one or more magazines?” The students circled numbers from a scale of 1---5, “1” signifying “never” and “5” signifying “always.” At the very bottom, they were asked to make an approximate guess for how much they thought they read total in one week, not including school reading and additionally, how much they read including their school work.
Findings

The analysis was basically only done of the hours per week of reading. The average number of hours was startling; only 3 hours per week including school work and zero excluding homework! (Looking back now, I realize that if they read for a certain number of minutes, it should have been factored in more accurately. Perhaps using “hours” was wishful thinking.) The most common response for types of outside reading was magazine reading. Samples they gave were “Seventeen,” “Style,” and “Rolling Stone.”

The most interesting finding in the survey results was that 72% of those surveyed said they enjoyed Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) most of the time. SSR, as it is called at FCHS, is a program that was implemented by the English Department wherein students and teachers alike read 40 minutes per week in class. Although they are encouraged to read books, the students can ultimately choose what they want to read. The teachers use the time to read as well thus serving as models for the students.

It seems that one of the keys to the success of SSR might be that the students are given a choice of what to read. The power to choose what they will do or be involved in mentally stimulates a large number of students to use the time during English class to read quietly. The material they find is interesting to them and/or is relevant to their lives.

This leads us to the question; do we have to then force students to read in school, controlled environment if we want them to read at all? I think the answer is, “yes.” For the students who are disciplined enough to read on their own, that’s wonderful. For the rest of them or are not going to do that, it is important that the expectation is there at school for them to take the time to sit down and read. These students may be challenged in reading but if the pressure is off, perhaps sitting down quietly is something that may get them to a point where reading isn’t such a scary task anymore.

Reflections

Originally, I wanted to focus on reading strategies for this project so that I might help my students improve their content-based reading skills. However, exposure has to be the first step. Having content material available to interest a myriad of students and readers may help many of them become more comfortable with reading, and time for reading. Providing the quiet, stable environment during SSR may teach some students what kind of a setting they need to be in to read closely and truly pay attention.

This study provided results that would support implementation of school-wide SSR in all subjects. Students should be exposed to quiet reading every day for 20 minutes. Planning for scheduling conflicts and interference with certain subjects more often than others would have to be accounted for in advance. In addition, all teachers would need to provide a variety of reading materials for their students. There might be rotating supplies or a grant could be written to obtain more materials for certain schools low on books, magazines or newspapers. The reading could even be done on the computer!
Most importantly, students tell us they do enjoy reading sometimes. If we could continue to foster an environment where enjoyable reading is part of an everyday routine, the process of reading, which can be a complicated, may be easier for some of our struggling readers and keep our avid readers reading more.