

TEENAGERS TALKING ABOUT READING AND LIBRARIES

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Past research has shown teenagers to be reluctant to read and less likely to visit libraries than younger children. These conclusions are debated and further investigation is needed. Difficulties abound in researching teenagers' opinions. Teenagers can be reluctant to participate in activities and peer support is often very important in determining their willingness to take part. Large-scale surveys of hundreds of student participants do not allow in-depth discussion of opinions and attitudes. Focus groups were conducted with metropolitan Perth high school students to investigate teenagers' thoughts on reading and libraries. Although some teenagers were enamoured of reading and libraries, others were more scathing but still found ways to take part in literacy activities and acquire the information they needed to negotiate their world.

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Past research has found that as children reach adolescence, they become less likely to read in their leisure time and thus visit libraries less.¹ One solution suggested to overcome this reluctance to read is the provision of a wide variety of reading materials, thus allowing choice in reading matter.² Reeves has found that teenagers can be highly selective in what they choose to read, but will enjoy reading when they find something they connect with.³ One universally popular type of reading material is magazines.⁴ The provision of comics and graphic novels has been presented as a tactic to encourage teenage reading.⁵ While a focus on choice in reading materials is encouraging, some

critics question the veracity of the reported decline in enjoyment of reading and decrease in time spent reading.⁶ Much of the evidence for a decline is anecdotal, thus additional research is needed to investigate the phenomenon further.

Adult influence is a determining factor in teenagers' liking for reading, whether this is influenced by parents or other adults in a teenager's life.⁷ Libraries are often not a popular place for teenagers to acquire their reading material, with family or bookshops being the main sources.⁸ Internet use among teenagers is ubiquitous,⁹ with communication through social networking sites¹⁰ and instant messaging (IM) being particular favourites.¹¹ A survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found students were more likely to go to the internet for school assignments than the library,¹² although there is disagreement as to whether online sources are replacing books.¹³

This paper reports on one part of the author's doctoral research. Focus groups were held with high school students in order to gather data on teenage reading habits and their views on reading, libraries and graphic novels. All names of people, schools and libraries have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Many direct quotes from the sessions are reproduced. Most participants had the habit of inserting the word 'like' in their speech where it did not belong. In reproducing quotes these instances of 'like' were omitted as they sometimes confuse the meaning of the sentence.

FOCUS GROUPS AS A RESEARCH METHOD

Researching teenagers can prove problematic. They may be reluctant to take part in activities and peer support is often important in determining whether or not they will take part. Focus groups were considered a suitable research method to combat these challenges. For this project seven focus group sessions were conducted at seven different metropolitan Perth high schools, with between five and seven students in each group. This equated to 41 teenage participants in the research. Specific details of the research method can be found in previous literature.¹⁴

During all sessions a number of graphic novels of different genres were provided so that participants could see exactly what a graphic novel is (some people have never encountered the term) and what is available in the format. A list of questions was used as a guide for each discussion, but sometimes other topics were introduced. Thus, areas covered were not exactly the same for each group.

The preliminary analysis of the data provided a rich picture of the participants' opinions, and focus groups were deemed a valuable research method in gathering teenagers' opinions. The qualitative nature of the research means the results cannot be generalised to all teenagers,¹⁵ but they may be transferable to similar situations¹⁶ and insights from the research used to look at similar groups of teenagers.¹⁷

A number of themes emerged from the focus groups. These concerned teenagers' enthusiasm for reading, where they found their reading matter, and what they enjoyed reading. Graphic novels were a particular focus of the discussions because they have been noted as a favourite format of teenagers.

DO TEENAGERS READ?

There was diversity of opinion on whether participants found reading an enjoyable pastime and who read in their leisure time. Some enjoyed reading and regularly spent time reading; others enjoyed it, but were too busy with other things to read for pleasure. Even those participants who disliked reading and were very vocal in their dislike mentioned the reading materials they enjoyed and could cite instances of finding pleasure in reading.

Many participants enjoyed reading when they found something they considered 'good' to read. Kylie (14) was reluctant to admit to enjoying reading. She said, 'It bores me. It hurts my head,' but later added, 'It depends what book it is.' In describing what happens when she finds this elusive book she said, 'I get into it and then ... I can't ..., I don't want to put it down. I want to know what happens and it keeps on going and going.' Anna and Kelly (both 14) concurred. Kelly said, 'If you find a good book, it's really easy for me to read and I like it.' Appealing reading material was mentioned frequently. Melissa (14) said she liked 'stuff that's interesting.' The books she disliked were those 'that just go on and on and then it's just ... she dies.' At the start of her session, Mia (14) mentioned her dislike of reading, but later said, 'It depends what books I'm reading at the moment ... At the beginning of the year I was quite into this dragon book. I picked up this book and it was about dragons. I liked it, reading about dragons. But then I got bored of that and then changed.' Her classmates agreed and discussed books that had piqued their interest or discouraged them from reading. David (15) was an avid reader, so much so that he started reading one of the graphic novels during the session, while still taking part in the discussion. His English teacher lent him books from the English Department which were for higher grades than his Year 9. He said, 'I remember I had [Jane Austen's] *Pride and Prejudice*. I barely read it. It took me ... two months to finish because I'd do something else instead of reading the book. I didn't like it. It was just a little bit too old-fashioned and girly.' When asked why he didn't just stop reading it, he said he always finished a book, whether he liked it or not. Two of his classmates also did this, although most participants would stop reading a book they found uninteresting, or never begin because they thought it would be uninteresting.

Despite declaring, 'I never read, never read a book,' Leah (14) still had views on what made for enjoyable reading material. She said it was good to 'read about stuff that's actually happening at the moment.' Leah then mentioned the books she does like – biographies. Her class read Karen Levine's *Hana's Suitcase* and she 'actually liked that.' When asked if they read books in their spare time, both Ryan (14) and Tom had one word to say, 'No.' Later Tom talked about what he did like reading – sports magazines. This confirms Reeves's view that high school students can be highly selective in their reading material.¹⁸

Adam (16), Danielle, Teneal and Sandra (all 15), Cassie (14) and Kelly read in bed before going to sleep and sometimes stayed up half the night. Danielle said, 'You start reading a chapter and then it gets to a good bit and you have to read on to find out what happens and there's another good bit and then you finish the book.' Adam gave his reason for enjoying reading as, 'I normally read because I just think it's good, how it's written and I want to keep reading ... Then I'm there for ages.'

Bianca (15) said she read every day, Teneal tried to finish a book a week, and Rita (15) was proud of having read 30 books over the course of the year. Rita said, 'I generally like reading if I have nothing to do which is pretty much most of the time, I'm just reading.' Melissa was part of a group who were in a lower-achieving English class and despite her fellow participants' vocal dislike of books and reading, she said, 'I read a lot of books.' Her classmates found reading 'boring' or 'all the same.' They did not want to read because they 'hated it.' Their negative comments did not affect Melissa's willingness to share her good opinion of reading.

When asked what they would prefer to do in their spare time, reading or another activity, participants rarely chose reading. Some were too busy with other activities. Angela (14) said, 'I do ... lots of sport and everything, so reading's just something I have to get done for school after. It's not something I choose to do.' Angela later said she goes through phases of reading a lot and then not reading so much. At the time of the discussion she was going through the latter, and implied this would end at some stage and she would start reading again more often. Even avid reader Ellen (14) said, 'It depends what I'm feeling like. If I was really bored and ... I was tired, I'd read. But if I was up there, out and felt like doing something else, I'd ...' She didn't finish this statement, but her meaning was clear. Rita and Kelly agreed with this. Kelly said, 'It depends like what kind of day it is ... If it's nice outside, it's probably better to go outside ... If it's ... raining, you've really got nothing else to do.' Reading being a last resort was a common opinion. Peter (14) said, 'Reading's ... the last thing on my list of things to do.' Simon (14) suggested if he was sick or if there was nothing on television he might consider reading as an option and Kylie also mentioned this lack of television, '[If] I can't watch the TV or the computer. If I have nothing to do then I'll read.'

A number of participants discussed reading within their family. The literature indicates that this leads to an ongoing enjoyment of reading.¹⁹ Jeremy's (14) mother 'read a lot' and he read 'an hour or quite a bit every night.' Neil (14) read 'quite a lot really' and often got books from his brother. Kylie's brother also 'read heaps' and despite some negative comments on reading, she enjoyed it on occasion. Danielle's and Adam's 'parents read all the time.'

Other research suggests encouragement by any significant adult in a child's life can replicate the above mentoring effect of a family's reading.²⁰ When Angela was in Year 7 she had a teacher who 'was always forcing us to read ... We had a map in our classroom and it had different ... spots around the world and you had to read a book for each place. And then the first person around won something.'

It was ... 60 books or something.' This led to Angela reading 'heaps.' She added, 'Me and my friends we all read ..., we all kind of ... read the same series at the same time. So we'd each buy ... a few of them and then we'd all just share.'

While there was diversity in what teenagers thought of reading, there was more consensus on where reading materials were found. Raiding the family bookshelf or buying books and magazines was more common than visiting the library to find something to read.

TEENAGERS IN THE LIBRARY

Participants were asked about their use of libraries as a source of reading material. The focus groups confirmed the literature that finds libraries are not a popular place for teenagers to visit.²¹ School libraries were used more often than public libraries. Some exceptions to the norm were Melissa, Ellen and Chelsea (13) who went to the public library to find books to read. Melissa went when she had school assignments to do and she 'usually got two or three books' to read in her free time. Adam found books to read at his school library. The library was not popular with other participants. Many participants were more likely to find their reading material at home, either bought for them by a family member (often a parent) or previously read by someone in the house. Danielle was an avid reader, but only went to the library to find information for school assignments.

Most of the schools involved in the focus groups held a regular class in their school library, where students were expected to choose a book and read it for the duration of the class. Some participants, for example Rosa, enjoyed this and if they had found a good book, would take it home to finish reading. Others found it a good time to have a 'social session.' Leah said, 'Half of us sit on the floor, on the couches, you know. We put the books up and then just talk to each other.'

The library at one school was very well used before school began and during breaks. Students used the computers, looked at books and magazines, or finished homework. The students in the session at this school did not think so highly of the regular class session they had in their library. It was more structured than at other schools, and although they could choose a book, they were limited in their choice and had to complete activities after their reading. Tim (15) was particularly vocal in his disdain for these classes. His classmates must have heard his views before, because they laughed at his forceful opinions. The lack of choice in reading material may have led to their dislike.²² Class sessions at the library meant the school library was more likely to be visited than the public library. Some students were not able to get to the public library, such as Jeremy, a boarder at his school. Tanya (15) was too busy with other things. Conversely, some students went to the public library because their mother did. Natasha (13) and Ryan did this, but 'just [to] have a look around' and they did not borrow anything. Liam (13) went to the public library with his mother and found graphic novels to read. When Jason's (15) mother worked late, he went to the public library after school.

This lack of library use did not equate to a lack of reading among participants, and there was great variety in the reading matter preferred by the teenagers.

WHAT DO TEENAGERS READ?

The reading materials of choice for the participants varied greatly, from novels of specific genres, to biographies, newspapers, magazines, and the ubiquitous internet.

Rosa (14) liked reading teenage romances; she liked ‘happy endings.’ Books about teenagers were popular among many participants. Tanya described these as stories that ‘relate to our lives at the moment ... parties, boys, everything that’s happening now.’ Leah found John Marsden’s *Letters from the Inside* about two teenage penpals, which she read for her English class, ‘better than any other book we had to read.’ Jason qualified this with, ‘You wouldn’t just read a book about kids or something.’ April (15) preferred horror stories, Danielle liked detective mysteries and Simon liked action or comedy.

Leah was scathing of reading and at one stage said, ‘Can you try and ban reading?’ Her friend Tanya replied, ‘You can’t ban reading, because that means you’d ban magazines and the internet.’ Both magazines and the internet were popular, even with anti-reading Leah.

Magazines were read by almost all of the students, the most popular being sports magazines for boys and fashion/beauty magazines for girls. ‘This is reading that teens enjoy, that they do without any adult prodding – regularly, extensively and with great attention to detail.’²³ During the focus groups Ryan thought it was the pictures that made magazines so appealing, and during a different session April agreed. Melissa liked the current information she found in magazines. ‘Magazines now are actually ... way more interesting I reckon, because you find out so much new stuff and information that you think would be useful.’ Joanna (15) worked in a supermarket and read magazines while waiting for customers. She described this as a ‘hell good’ use of her time. Angela used to buy magazines herself, ‘but now I just take them from my sister and read them.’ She liked the real life stories and found the fashion pages boring. Kylie was an anomaly in not liking magazines. She said, ‘I don’t really like reading about other people and ... clothes and stuff.’

All the students used the internet, but often did not equate this with reading. The internet was where they looked for assignment information and then something fun to do after homework (or during if they could hide it from parents). A particular use of the internet was for talking to friends through IM and social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. (During the focus group sessions only MySpace was mentioned because at that time, 2006, ‘MySpace was the cool thing for high school teens.’²⁴ Facebook has since become as popular.) One group laughed when asked if they read things on the internet. Angela qualified this by saying, ‘I do MySpace lots ... And MSN [IM], but not really to read things ... If we have to do a book in English then I search that, but that’s about it.’ Both MySpace and IM involve literacy activities; writing (typing) thoughts

and reading others' online thoughts. During a different session Leah said, 'You can go on the net and do it [find information for assignments]. It's still reading isn't it?' When reassured this was reading she added, 'Yeah, because there's words' and others concurred.

In confirmation of the finding from the Pew Internet & American Life Project that 75% of teenagers who have access to the internet use IM,²⁵ IM or chatting were discussed by many focus group participants. When Angela was in primary school she did not use MySpace or IM (through the MSN service) because she talked to her friends all day at school. 'Now I'm at high school I know ... heaps of people from other schools ... so it's my chance to catch up with them ... It's free. If I want to talk to someone I just ... tell them to go on MSN to save calling or SMSing them or whatever.' 'The Internet has lured teens into a venue that is much more appealing to them than the dusty/musty neighborhood library.'²⁶ This was the case for many of the students in the focus groups, and these students often had access to the internet from home. Some students said the only reason they would use a computer in a library would be to print out an assignment, after they had completed it at home.

'Many students turn to Google as their main source of information,'²⁷ just as Leah, Tom and Joanna said they did. Adam talked about his use of the internet for school assignments. 'Ninety per cent of the time you're going to find it on the internet ... Even if it's not as good as the one in the book, at least you've got it straight away.' When asked what his teachers thought of Adam's using only the internet as a source he replied, 'Yeah but, well like ...' and trailed away. After a pause Adam continued by saying he had done this for a recent assignment, and the only comment the teacher had was that he had to be careful not to copy word for word from the source. Aronson believes online sources are not replacing books. People are reading in the many different formats and 'the new technologies will [not] always replace the old ... the two can coexist.'²⁸ Focus groups participants were not following this trend, particularly when looking for school assignment information. In comparing books to the internet Kylie said, 'It's just so much more interesting, there's more variety [on the internet].'

Graphic Novels

The graphic novel format was discussed during the focus group sessions as one suggested way to encourage teenagers to read, with a number of graphic novels on hand for participants to look at. Some students had never encountered graphic novels before, were not familiar with the term, or thought of them as comics. Included among the graphic novels were a few manga (Japanese comics). Some manga are read the Japanese way, from right to left, and this was a novel experience for many participants. When right to left manga was explained to one group, Kylie said, 'Oh my god, are you serious?' These manga confounded many of the students, and some said they would not read right to left manga because they were 'confusing', 'weird' or 'dumb.' Equally, there were students who were not fazed by the novelty.

Ellen ‘really, really, really’ liked reading. Nevertheless, she had negative comments about some reading materials, for example, reading the newspaper was ‘boring.’ Another pet hate of hers was books with pictures. She almost shouted, ‘Pictures! I hate pictures! I get half way through a book and see a picture and I stop. I want a novel, not a picture book. I reckon if you’re an author you have to be an author, not be an illustrator.’ Her dislike encompassed graphic novels. Ellen was not interested in looking at any of the graphic novels during the session. Every other participant at least flicked through some of them. Phil (14) felt that reading a comic was ‘just looking at pictures’ which was boring, and he would ‘rather read a book.’ Adam and Kate (13) also preferred their books without pictures because ‘you can imagine them yourself.’

Four students from different sessions, Sandra, Liam, Mia and Amy (14), particularly liked graphic novels and attended the focus group because of this. Sandra’s mother and older sister enjoyed the format and introduced her to graphic novels. Liam found graphic novels at his local public library and began reading them. Mia and Amy were both Asian, loved manga and anime (the animated film version of manga) and were very interested in the manga displayed during the session. Amy asked to borrow some of them at the end of the session (unfortunately this was not possible). At the beginning of the session Mia said she did not like reading, but when the discussion turned to manga, her voracious reading of it became apparent. Manga is available across Asia²⁹ and many Asian teenagers and younger adults now living in western countries read manga while living in their country of origin, and enjoy it as a reminder of home. Enjoyment of manga was not shared by all Asian participants. Alex (13) had read some, but was not enthusiastic about them. Tim was not a big reader and would only read a comic if one of his friends told him it was good. April was in an English class for lower achieving students, because she had only recently learnt English as a second language. April had read manga in the past, but not enjoyed it because of the length of the series. She would read the first book and then not be able to find subsequent volumes. ‘If I want to know the end, I have to read more and more and more and more and more graphic novels to get to the end.’

Ryan and Jason had encountered graphic novels previously and both found them ‘easier to read than books.’ David had read a couple of graphic novels before the session, including the graphic novel version of the novel and recent film *Stormbreaker*, and found them ‘too short, too simple.’ Unlike other students this was a negative characteristic for David. He liked his reading to be challenging. Despite this, David began reading one of the graphic novels during the session and at the end, asked his teacher to buy some graphic novels for the English Department to use in English classes (and for David to borrow for his reading outside of school, which his teacher allowed).

A number of students had not encountered graphic novels previously, and were not convinced of their appeal after seeing those displayed during the session. Rosa found the pages too crowded and similarly Kylie felt too much was happening at once: ‘You’re ... trying to read one thing and all this [the pictures] distracts you.’ Her classmate Teresa agreed: ‘I see a picture ahead and look at it before I’ve read the part and then I know what happens.’ These views might be ameliorated

by further exposure to the format. At a later stage in the session, Kylie looked at C. Clugston-Major's *Queen Bee*, about teenagers in school, her favourite topic. Kylie became so engrossed in the story she asked where she could find a copy to read.

Other participants found enjoyment in the displayed graphic novels immediately. Carl (13) did not enjoy reading, but was very interested in K. Barker's *Plastic Man* which was available during the session. He said, '*Plastic Man*'s good.' Robert (14) considered himself 'a pretty good reader' but had not encountered graphic novels before the session. He said, 'I reckon they're really good' and thought he might look for some graphic novels to read.

Ideas for Practice in Libraries

Despite the praise for graphic novels and their popularity among teenagers found in the literature, the format was not found to be universally liked during the discussions with teenagers. There are a number of possible explanations for this situation.

Most of the literature about graphic novels is written by librarians discussing their current library users. As much as might be wished otherwise, these users are a minority of the whole population of teenagers. The participants in this research were chosen from a pool of teenagers from local high schools, and were not necessarily those who liked reading or even visited libraries. This difference in populations would lead to differences in findings.

Some of the participants suggested graphic novels might seem intimidating at first glance (particularly manga which is read the Japanese way from right to left) because people had not experienced them before. When asked if she thought studying a graphic novel for her English class would be enjoyable, Kelly said, 'I'm not sure everyone in the class would really know what they were.' She thought fellow students would have to learn more about them, and read some, before they could decide if they liked them. One group of students had been provided with some graphic novels to read during their English class prior to the focus group session. Simon had enjoyed the manga he had read then and wanted to find more, particularly one series displayed during the focus group session.

Some teenagers came to the sessions already convinced of the pleasures of reading graphic novels, many of whom found graphic novels at their school or local public library. Others were willing to try them if they come across them in the future, and others wanted to actively seek them out now they knew what to expect.

As well as diversity in opinions on graphic novels, there was also diversity in teenagers' views on reading in general and the materials they liked to read. Librarians can make the most of this by providing variety in reading materials to cater to all teenagers' tastes and not value any one material more than another. Newkirk's research on boys' reading (or lack of it) discovered possible reasons behind this. In school-sanctioned reading materials, which were often those found in libraries, Newkirk believes 'books trump magazines; print trumps the

visual; the serious trumps the humorous; fiction trumps nonfiction.’³⁰ Many of the participants in the focus groups stated their preference for the latter in these pairs (particularly magazines, which were universally liked). In some instances participants were unsure if particular forms of reading were actually considered reading. Alex questioned whether his reading of comic books, as he called graphic novels, was a valid example of reading (despite the research topic and his school library having a sizeable graphic novel collection). Angela’s earlier mention of her use of IM and reluctance to call this reading is another example. (This could be because IM is so similar to speech and involves numerous abbreviations and spelling and grammatical errors.) The promotion of all formats and genres as equal, by librarians and also teachers, could increase teenagers’ willingness to read and find enjoyment in reading, especially by those who prefer what have traditionally been deemed ‘lesser’ reading materials.

Occasionally participants did not know what was provided by their school or public library. Liam said he found graphic novels at his local public library, because his school library did not have any. His teacher librarian subsequently said the school library did have a graphic novel collection. Enhanced promotion of both school and public library collections and events, and also of libraries in general, could alleviate this problem. Improved links between school and public libraries could also add to teenagers’ knowledge of what is available, thus increasing their use of both types of library.³¹

CONCLUSION

While these results are still preliminary, after talking to teenagers about their thoughts on reading, libraries and graphic novels, the demarcations between teenage readers and non-readers were not as definite as could be hoped. Some teenagers happily labelled themselves readers, describing the reading materials they enjoyed and the time they spend reading. Others were more hesitant, a popular answer being, ‘It depends ...’. At the other end of the spectrum, some teenagers were vocally anti-reading. While the particular responses of participants cannot be generalised to the whole population, the range of opinions from the focus groups goes some way to explaining the debate in the literature on how much teenagers read, and how much they enjoy reading.

Happily, no matter what their articulated views on the concept of reading, all teenage participants shared instances of enjoying reading, even those who initially said they hated reading and ‘never’ read anything. Providing an encouraging and non-threatening environment enabled even those teenagers who did not like reading as much, and were thus more reluctant to admit to reading in their free time, to feel secure enough to voice their opinions. The challenge for librarians is to find, provide and promote this ‘interesting’ reading matter – the ‘right’ book, novel, graphic novel, biography, magazine or website – that will encourage more teenagers to frequent libraries and make the time to read and enjoy their reading.

NOTES

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