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Aliteracy: The Relationship Between the Electronic Culture and Voluntary Reading

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ALITERACY:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ELECTRONIC CULTURE
AND
VOLUNTARY READING

by

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Abstract

Aliteracy, the term used to describe those who can read but choose not to do so, has become a grave concern in this country. A review of the literature indicates Americans are choosing to use their leisure time to interact with the electronic media to gather information instead of reading to gain knowledge. The skills of critical thinking and decision making are at stake. Schools and homes who have been successful in teaching the skill of reading must now instill the value of reading in order to preserve the democratic process upon which this country was founded.

Chapter I. Introduction

Problem Statement

There is alarm among educators that with Americans having more leisure time, they are doing less reading. Aliteracy, the term applied to those who can read but choose not to, has become a growing concern. Is there a relationship between the rise in the electronic culture in America, and the decline in voluntary reading? What is the role of the school in combating the problem of aliteracy? Is this phenomenon observable in other countries?

Rationale

Boorstin (1984) in a recent report by the Library of Congress, suggests that illiteracy and aliteracy are threats to our democratic tradition which was built on books and reading. As early as 1647, the Court of Massachuttes mandated the teaching of reading in every township where there were fifty or more households. They believed it necessary not only for a well ordered society, but also for the moral welfare of the the individual (Morrow, 1986).

Recent studies by Roger Farr of Indiana University indicate that students are reading better at comparable grade levels than they were a generation ago. They are are reading better, but other studies suggest they are not reading more (Boorstin, 1984; Dupart, 1985; Greaney,

1985). In a Book Industry Study Group survey conducted in 1978, 94% of those interviewed were readers, but 39% of them had never read a book (LeGrande-Brodsky, 1979). A typical response is that busy Americans read newspapers and magazines, yet studies reveal that only 26% read magazines (Mekulecky, 1978), and that newspaper circulation has dropped from 62.1 million in 1970, to 61.4 million in 1981 (Thimmesh, 1982). Perhaps schools have succeeded in teaching the skill of reading, but have been less successful in teaching the value of reading.

Television has long been blamed for taking away incentive and time once available for reading (Indresano, 1978; Spiegel, 1981). Packard (1983) feels that children are bombarded and overwhelmed by the electronic stimuli of television, radio, video rock, microcomputers, films and video games. He suggests their blaring and flashing fills a void left by the demise of the traditional family structure.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to review the literature to determine if there is a relationship between the rise of the electronic culture in America and the decline in voluntary reading; to look at the role of the school in combating aliteracy, and to see if this phenomenon is observable in other countries.

Chapter II: Review of the literature

Aliteracy

One of the most recent problems to confront reading educators is that of aliteracy; there is concern for those who can read, but do not. Americans seem to be turning away from books and reading. Over half the seventeen year olds interviewed by NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) since 1969 chose reading a book as their least favorite leisure activity (cited in Gutknecht, 1985). Mekulecky (1978) found early adolescents do little reading other than for assignments. Summer reading involved less than ten minutes per day for 25 of the 100 students surveyed, with the mean reading time being a little over half an hour per day.

In 1983 the Book Industry Study Group commissioned a study on reading and book publishing. The study found that 95% of Americans are reading magazines, newspapers and books; of these, 56% are book readers who read an average of 24 books in the six months prior to the survey (Lehr, 1985). In a 1978 Gallop survey, it was determined that one out of three American adults read a book or more per month, with 24% reading more than 21 books per year. The number of adults who could read a book but chooses not to, is about 44% (Boorstin, 1985).

Most reading done by adults is done on the job, with adults averaging 1 hour and 46 minutes per day reading (Mekulecky, 1978). A study done by Guthrie and Seifert (1982) examined the reading habits of four occupational groups (professional, small business, skilled, and unskilled) and found that all groups read some each day. The amount of time spent in reading ranged from 60 minutes for the unskilled, to 224 minutes for the professional group. The most frequently read materials were brief documents, bills, letters, labels, forms, signs and directions. This seems to confirm Y. Goodman's observation (1983):

Sometimes we don't think of reading as something some people do all day at their jobs. A growing number of people may be doing so much reading and writing during the day on their daily jobs, that when they are in a leisure situation, they would prefer to get information in other ways, either from T.V. or from going to a play or concert... (p. 136-137).

Perhaps also because of interaction with new technologies, and immersion in an "electronic culture", Americans are choosing to read less.

Electronic Culture

Shenleman (1985) refers to the electronic culture as the overwhelming electronic stimuli that bombards those growing up in today's society. Young people are greatly influenced by the electronic media which often seems to control their lives. They are growing up in a culture of televisions, radios, telephones, computers, tapes, videos and films, where the silence required for reading is often difficult to find. This is an age of ever increasing information. Indeed, the electronic media is responsible for the information age (Goodman, 1985). More information is heard than could ever be read. Larrick (1983) states that the country is becoming one of oral language; oral language through electronics. The voice most often heard in the home is not that of the family, but that of the electronic media (Packard, 1983). Fader (1983) agrees this is an oral era and feels the television set has taken the place of family communication, to the degree that the thing most families have in common is the time spent around the television set.

Harper's Index reports Americans watched 213 billion hours of TV in 1983 (Shenleman, 1984). Caplow found the median time of watching was 28 hours per week,

but found that some of this time was extremely passive, not interfering with other activities (Boorstin, 1984).

Television competes with other electronic media for leisure time. Radios, record players, telephones, videos, movies and computers are all enjoying increased sales. Video games are nearly an eight billion dollar industry (Shenleman, 1985). What then, is the relationship between this rise in the electronic culture and the decline of voluntary reading?

Lehr (1985) reports that Americans spend 16.3 hours per week watching TV, 16.4 hours per week listening to music, and 11.7 hours reading. Newman and Prowda (1982), analyzed the pattern of reading and viewing behaviors of 7,500 students in grades 4, 8 and 11. They found 54% of the fourth graders were heavy viewers (watching over four hours per day), 40% of the eighth graders, and 18% of the eleventh graders were considered heavy viewers. Most of these same students spent less than five hours per week reading. Seventy-four per cent of the fourth graders found reading a pleasurable activity, while only 60% of the eleventh graders reported it as pleasurable. Both leisure reading and television viewing decreases as the student gets older, Newman and Prowda concluded. This agrees

with a study reported by Lehr (1985) which voiced concern that 16-21 year olds were reading less, noting a drop from 78% in 1978, to 63% in 1983.

Telfer and Kahn (1984) questioned 234 fourth, eighth and eleventh grade students to determine what types of media took the place of television as they got older. They found that all ages spent about the same amount of time with the electronic media, but eleventh graders had shifted from television to music. Reading assignments took about the same amount of time for all. The results show the following: 11th grade students with high reading scores spent less time listening to music and more time reading for pleasure. There was no apparent association between reading scores and the habit of reading while using other media. 8th grade students with low reading scores were typically those who mixed reading with listening to music or watching television. Fourth grade students who had lower reading scores were those who tried to read while watching television.

One of the gravest concern of this trend is the failure of the electronic media to develop higher level thinking skills. The knowledge and strategies necessary for traditional literacy are not encouraged.

Cognitive and linguistic skills, and critical thinking skills are not being fostered by hours in front of the television (Shenleman, 1985). Larrick (1984) voices the same concern. She feels TV viewing does not require or encourage raising questions, making comparisons, or arriving at conclusions. Others feel that if students fail to use the rational process demanded by books, they will be less able to make decisions for themselves and for society (Thimmish, 1984; Morrow, 1986).

Cole (1984), in discussing the formation of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress in 1977, states the central purpose of the center is to remind reading Americans of the importance of the book in an electronic age. The center stresses the difference in information and knowledge, stating that information bombards us from all directions; knowledge is available only through books.

Not everyone sees the electronic culture as a detriment to reading. Boorstin (1985) sees the book as being enriched by the new technologies. Indeed there is an obvious attempt being made to blend the old with the new; many innovative programs have recently been designed to use the popularity of television to

encourage reading. One such program is "Read All About It," a project developed jointly by the Library of Congress and CBS. The program aired in 1979 with "All Is Quiet On The Western Front." At the conclusion of the program, viewers were told of several other books on World War II that were suggested by the Library of Congress and available at local libraries. Over thirty similar broadcasts have been made and the project is continuing (Gratz, 1982).

Another continuing project, "Reading Rainbow", is a cooperative effort by PBS and Kellogg Company to encourage reading among 9 to 11 year olds. PBS also hosts "Voyage of the Mimi", a series of fifteen minute TV programs designed to teach math and science, supplemented by books and computer simulation. Holt, Reinhart and Winston and Bank Street College joined the U. S. Department of Education to make this new format available (Shenelman, 1985).

In Rome, Georgia, where the population grew only 2% in the period 1974 to 1980, library circulation grew 63%. Reason for growth is attributed to a cable TV program produced by the Tri-County Library and broadcast in rural areas where there is little commercial television reception. Books are read and

shared, and fears of walking into an unfamiliar place are dispelled as many become familiar with the library through the cable programs (Sabine, 1984).

Voluntary Readers

Who then, are the voluntary readers in today's society? The Book Industry Study Group (BISG) reveals that the "bookworm", the recluse who seeks escape from the world through books, is a figment of the imagination. Today's readers are active people. The study showed the heaviest readers were also involved in their church, their political party, in sports, and in community affairs. The more active and involved they were, the more likely they were to be readers of books.

According to Boorstin (1985), women read more than men, whites read more than other Americans, and single adults read more than married ones. He states that white collar workers read more than blue collar workers. Gallop (1978) found that the heaviest readers of books were women between ages 18 and 34. This agrees with the BISG finding that those reading 26 books in six months were affluent, educated women under fifty years old.

Greaney (1980) found voluntary readers in school tended to be girls from middle class families who had high reading achievement scores and held cards from

their local libraries.

Whitehead (1975) found that many who read widely were also heavy movie and television viewers.

Voluntary readers tend to have had role models who valued reading, who read to them as children and were seen reading by them as children (Greaney, 1980). Research indicates that reading habits are established early. Bloom (1964) feels they are determined by the time a child reaches sixth grade.

School's Role

What is the school's role in combating aliteracy and promoting voluntary reading among students? Since early influences and positive role models play an important role in establishing the reading habit, Y. Goodman (1983) feels schools should involve parents in developing reading habits in the young. She suggests encouraging them to fully participate in reading activities with their children. This would include anything from reading letters aloud and compiling shopping lists, to reading and sharing books together.

Many schools have programs designed to increase parent's understanding of what goes on at school and how they can help their children at home. One such model program is PEP (Parents Encourage Pupils), an

inner city parent involvement reading program (Shucks, Ulsh, & Platt, 1983). Parents are asked to help their children read a book, do reading homework, work on word lists, or play reading games. Behavior modification is used to reinforce the students for completing their reading assignments. Results show the value of parental involvement. Students seemed to sense the importance parents placed on reading activities, and reading interest and achievement scores climbed.

Materials and programs used in the classroom have a strong influence on a student's attitude toward reading. Morrow (1986) found few literacy activities, but an array of linguistic skills and subskills in most classrooms. Most children seem to view reading as work, not as a pleasurable activity. Holt's feeling that some reading questions and activities embarrass and humiliate children and result in turning them off to reading (1983), is shared by Smith (1983).

Many children leave school without ever suspecting that reading can be a pleasant activity. Our culture has a nervous psyche, an anxiety to get on with things... or deliberately relax. Schools contribute (to aliteracy) by concentrating on reading for information, not for pleasure or experience (p. 134).

Stern and Shavelson (1983) suggest teachers look at their plans to see if goals for the low group are similar to goals for the high group. They cite informal studies which suggest the relationship between an emphasis on comprehension and more difficult material, and a rise in the performance and interest in both groups. Adler (1982) advocates the same idea in his proposal for a one tract system for all public schools.

Teachers usually base their plans for reading instruction on test scores and teacher's manuals (Morrow, in press) and their attitudes do not always reflect what they believe but what they feel others, notably parents and principals, believe.

An earlier study found attitudes improved among teachers and students after an intensive ten week program to promote voluntary reading thru literary activities. Students were read aloud to each day. Puppets and flannel boards were used to tell stories. At least five books per student were available for pleasure reading in a comfortable classroom library. Researchers found most teachers and pupils continued to use the literary activities long after the field study was completed (Morrow, 1985).

Others share the feeling that good literature should be the focus of all reading programs (Y. Goodman, 1983; Spiegel, 1981; Marshall, 1984). Heins (1984) challenges teachers of adolescents to be aware of the excellent literature available, and to use it instead of forcing the classics, which she feels many adolescents are not mature enough to understand.

Sullivan (1985) uses the word "paperjoy" as an antonym for the much used "paperwork", to describe the pleasures of leisure reading. He outlines a questioning approach to be used with older adolescents and college students to cure the aliteracy problem. The levels of literary self discovery he suggests are discovery, improvisational, and interpretive inquiry. Students are asked to read and formulate questions they feel need to be answered as they read, even though answers may not be clear cut.

Time to read is an important factor in encouraging voluntary reading in the classroom. Spiegel (1981) suggests that teachers using basals consider giving up some of the ditto and workbook activities and replacing them with free reading. She stresses that children sense what teachers value by the way teachers choose to have them spend their time in class.

Spiegel (1981) encourages the practice of USSR,

(Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) introduced by Hunt in 1970. Using materials of their choice, students and teachers alike read without interruption for a specified amount of time. McCracken and McCracken (1978) found seven positive messages received by students who participate in USSR programs.

1. Reading is important.
2. Reading is something everyone can do.
3. Reading is communicating with the author.
4. Children are capable of sustained thought.
5. Books are meant to be read in large sections.
6. Teachers believe students comprehend.
7. Teachers trust children. (p. 407)

Downing (1982) feels reading is like playing chess or fishing; one becomes proficient through repeated practice. Bamberger (1976) voices the same thought in his statement that many students do not read books because they do not read well enough, and they do not read well enough because they do not read books.

Other Countries

A review of the available literature does not present enough information to draw conclusions on the influence of the electronic culture on reading in other countries. It does, however, suggest that reading is

valued more in other countries than in America. Mann and Burgoyne (cited in Mekulecky, 1978) found in countries like Canada, Great Britian, Australia, and Germany, the percentage of citizens reading books for pleasure was from two to three times greater than the precentage of citizens reading books for pleasure in the United States. Jennison (1973) states that almost everywhere in the world, reading is more valued than it is in this country. He tells of seeing students in Bombay "hunkered" under street lamps to read because their homes were unlighted.

Decker (1985) suggests looking at the reading programs used in New Zealand and Greece to correct our aliteracy problem. The program she suggests deemphasises basal reading, workbooks and teaching for the competency test. She stresses the importance of demonstrating to children that learnig to read will enable them to read, learn and enjoy independently.

Mekulecky (1978) looked at Norway and Japan, two industrializrd nations that place high value on reading. He found that although the cultures differ, they have similar educational approaches to reading. In Japan children receive their own books and are read to before the age of one.

Parents and schools participate in read-at-home programs. Entire families are involved in cooperative reading time and model reading programs. Time is given both at home and at school to inculcate the reading habit. Teachers and academic standards are held in high regard. The importance of education is obvious in this highly competitive society.

Norway's educational system provides a maximum opportunity for developing positive reading habits and attitudes. Children usually do not attend school until they are seven, therefore much of the early modeling and training takes place at home. When they do begin school, they only attend fifteen hours each week for the first three years. One third of this time is spent in reading activities. These children are with the same teacher for the first four years of school. This provides a longtime positive reading model in the classroom. Again, as in Japan, parents and teachers are in partnership to establish good reading attitudes and habits in the children.

Summary

Aliteracy, the term used to describe those who can read but choose not to do so, has become a growing concern in America. This research has addressed the

problem through a review of the literature to determine if there is a relationship between the rise of the electronic culture and the decline in voluntary reading in this country; to see who the voluntary readers are; to look at the role of the school in combating aliteracy; and to see if this phenomenon is observable in other countries.

Chapter III: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Books are the main source of knowledge, the reservoir of faith, memory, wisdom, poetry, philosophy, history and science. Books are the very essence of our civilization, as so profoundly stated by Barbara Tuchman.

Without books, history is silent, literature is dumb, science crippled, thought and speculation at a standstill. Without books, the development of a civilization would have been impossible. They are engines of change, windows on the world... They are companions, teachers, magicians, bankers of treasures of the mind. Books are humanity in print, (Barbara Tuchman, Historian, cited in Boorstin, 1986).

Aliteracy is a threat to this country's democratic tradition which was founded on books and reading. Thomas Jefferson believed the basis for a free society and civilization rested with having a literate public. He felt citizens must read widely and deeply in order to make informed decisions about their own self-government, (Morrow, 1986). A strong democratic, moral, productive society depends on an informed population which can and does read critically.

Research indicates the rise in technology and its widespread availability have been a detriment to voluntary reading. The electronic media has replaced reading as a leisure activity. More time is spent watching movies and television, talking on the telephone, listening to music, playing video games and interacting with computers, than in reading for pleasure (Lehr, 1985; Newman and Prowda, 1982; Telter and Kahn, 1984).

While one out of three adults averages reading a book a month, 44% of those who could read a book choose not to do so (Boorstin, 1985). It is alarming that reading for pleasure among 16 to 21 year olds has dropped from 78% in 1978 to 63% in 1983 (Lehr, 1985).

The school must assume the role of developing voluntary readers. Less emphasis on workbooks and skills, a literature based reading program and time to read for pleasure during class would create an environment where the love of reading could be learned.

Reading is valued more in other countries than in America (Jennison, 1973; Mekulecky, 1978; Decker, 1985). In Great Britain, Greece, Norway, and Japan, parents and schools work in partnership to instill good reading habits and attitudes. From an early age, the value of reading is stressed.

The gravest concern with America's trend away from books and toward the electronic media is the failure of the media to develop the skills and strategies necessary for traditional literacy. There is concern that those who fail to use the critical thinking skills demanded by books will be less able to make decisions for themselves and society.

Recommendations

Parents and educators have the leading role in combating aliteracy and encouraging a nation of citizens who value books and reading. There must be a partnership between home and school to inculcate a love of books and reading. Eighty-two percent of the parents of children who were considered to be heavy readers said they encouraged their children to appreciate books. Irving (1980) feels the most powerful of all adult influences on the young is that of the teacher stimulating reading in children.

What Parents Can Do

1. Read aloud to your children from infancy.
2. Be seen reading by your children.
3. Provide a variety of reading materials at home.
4. Take your children to the library.
5. Have children obtain their own library cards.
6. Be involved in your school's reading program.
7. Share your love of books with your children.

What Schools Can Do

1. Involve parents in a home reading program.
2. Provide a quality, literature based reading program.
3. Deemphasize skills and worksheets.
4. Provide a classroom library and encourage free reading.
5. Read aloud to your students daily.
6. Give time for sustained reading.
7. Share your love of books with your students.

Schools and homes have been successful in teaching the skill of reading. Their role now must be to impart the value of reading.

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