

Are Fewer Young People Reading for Pleasure?

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By Alfie Kohn

Several years ago, a teacher who regularly invited her students to “drop everything and read” their favorite books was asked by a colleague whether she was still setting aside class time for that purpose. She replied, “We haven’t been doing any reading since we started preparing the kids for the reading test.”

That response says as much about the collateral damage of our focus on test scores as it does about the poor quality of the tests themselves – and thus how little the resulting scores really tell us. I thought of that teacher’s comment just before Thanksgiving, when the National Endowment for the Arts released a report claiming that young Americans spend less time reading for pleasure these days.

At least one expert, Stephen Krashen, has his doubts about whether the data really support that conclusion. But let’s assume it’s true, and further, as the report contends, that this helps to explain why test scores are lagging. We’re confronted, then, with a terrible irony: Our preoccupation with those very scores may be why kids aren’t reading as much

in the first place.

To see how that's true, consider what's been found to promote, or to undermine, a love of reading. Positive factors include ready access to books, time to read them, exposure to adults who read for pleasure, and the chance to decide what to read. Research is very clear about that last item: The more choice kids have, the more likely that they'll enjoy reading and get better at it.

The ostensible decline in pleasure reading is often blamed on TV and other technology, but the data offer weak and inconsistent support for that hypothesis, at best. More likely to smother interest is the practice of offering kids rewards for reading. Scores of studies have found that the more we reward people for doing something, the more they come to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward.

Potential excitement about reading also evaporates as a result of the kind of instruction that focuses on narrow, isolated decoding skills. That doesn't mean phonics don't matter. It means learning to "break the code" should be part of a rich literacy curriculum that has kids reading real stories, not facing endless worksheets and contrived fragments of text harnessed to the skill of the week. (Hence the teacher who was heard saying to a child, "Put that book away and do your reading!")

"Hooked on phonics"? Please. No child has ever gotten hooked on the cr sound. For that matter, no child cares whether Pat's rat has a hat. Impoverished, scripted curriculums – devoid of meaning, context, and joy – teach kids that reading is something you'd never want to do. And that's what older students learn when they have to outline chapters or write book reports, or are made to read so many pages, or for so many minutes. Now the child's question isn't "Why did she [the character in the story] do that? Is she nuts??" It's:

“How much more do I have to read?”

Sadder still, children are forced to work what amounts to a second shift after school is over, as more and more homework is loaded on younger and younger children. It’s not just that the time eaten up by those assignments leaves less time for pleasure reading. It’s that many of those assignments adversely affect their attitude about the written word.

One reason for the push for more homework as well as more frantic drilling – particularly for low-income kids – is the current testing mania, exemplified and intensified by the No Child Left Behind Act. This legislation, and the whole corporate-styled “accountability” fad that gave rise to it, brings us back to that hapless teacher who is so busy trying to raise her students’ scores on the reading test that there’s no time to let them read.

In fact, a study of middle schools published in the journal Language Arts found that “the most frequently cited reason for not providing regular opportunities for free choice reading was the pressure teachers felt to explicitly cover the skills students needed to do well on the statewide competency test.”

The NEA report has it half right: Kids who love to read also read more proficiently. But standardized tests are poor measures of that proficiency and, more important, our concern with the results of those tests drives teachers to desperate measures to jack up the scores – at the expense of an engaging curriculum, a well-rounded education, and a desire on the part of children to keep reading after the last school bell has rung.

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