

ARE READERS NERDS?

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Abstract: Contrary to popular opinion, those who read more are more active and social than non-readers. To avoid social class and income confounds, this study examined attitudes among fourth and fifth graders in schools with high levels of poverty. Fifty to 75% of the children agreed with the statement "People I know who read are interesting and fun" and very few disagreed, confirming that readers are not nerds.

Some people think that readers are nerds, "book-worms" who don't get out much, don't do much, and are simply boring, dull people. The research, however, does not agree with this characterization. In fact, the results of a number of studies of adult readers show that readers are "active and social" (Bradshaw and Nichols, 2004).

Table 1 presents data originally published in 1982, from Zill and Wingate (1990), comparing literature readers (those who reported reading "any creative writings, such as stories, poems, plays and the like" for the last 12 months), those who read any kind of a book or magazine, and those who reported no reading. The results are remarkably consistent, with readers reporting being more active in all categories.

Table 1: Leisure Activities of Literature Readers, Non-Literature Readers, and Non-Readers (1982); adults 18 and older

LEISURE ACTIVITIES	literature readers	readers, not of literature	non-readers
<i>Amusements</i>			
Play card, board games	77%	62%	27%
Attend movies	75%	59%	25%
Visit amusement park	57%	49%	19%
Attend sports events	59%	43%	17%
<i>Exercise, Sports</i>			
jog, exercise	65%	43%	18%
play sports	48%	36%	14%
camping, hiking	43%	34%	14%
<i>Home-based activities</i>			
Repair home, car	66%	60%	28%
Gardening	69%	53%	34%
Gourmet cooking	38%	22%	8%
Collect stamps, coins	20%	10%	3%
<i>Charitable work</i>			
Volunteer, charity work	36%	21%	9%
<i>Cultural attendance</i>			
Visit historic sites	50%	28%	8%
Go to zoo	41%	25%	11%

Visit museums	32%	15%	4%
<i>Art & Crafts</i>			
Weaving, needlework	42%	29%	18%
Pottery, ceramics	17%	9%	3%
Photography, video	14%	6%	2%
Painting, drawing, sculpture	14%	6%	2%

From: Zill and Winglee, table 2, page 15.

We cannot, however, conclude that reading is directly associated with being active and social. As Zill and Wingate point out, the amount of leisure reading done is also closely associated with education and affluence (for confirming data, see Bradshaw and Nichols, 2004). It may be the case that those who are more affluent have more time and money to engage in these activities. (This is probably not the case for visiting museums. Bradshaw and Nichols (2004) present a multiple regression analysis showing a relationship between reading and visiting art museums and attending performing arts events, even when income and education were statistically controlled.)

To control for education, income and other related variables, we approached the question in a different way: The subjects in our study came from one social class, children in schools with high levels of poverty (90% or more free or reduced price lunch). All children were in grades four and five in four different schools in Austin, Texas.

We present here the results of only one item from a longer questionnaire we asked the children to fill out. We asked the children about people they knew who read a lot, whether they were "not interesting and fun," "kind of interesting and fun," or "very interesting and fun."

Table 2: Responses to: People I know who read are interesting and fun: grade four

school	n	very	kind of	not
1	44	68%	25%	7%
2	101	62%	32%	6%
3	43	69%	29%	2%
4	48	74%	26%	0%

Table 3: Responses to: People I know who read are interesting and fun: grade five

school	n	very	kind of	not
1	43	53%	44%	2%
2	99	62%	32%	6%
3	49	67%	27%	6%
4	51	68%	32%	0%

As presented in tables 2 and 3, the results are clear and consistent. Very few children felt that readers were not interesting and fun, and about two-thirds felt they were

very interesting and fun. The percentages are nearly the same in all four schools and in both grades.

Conclusion

Our question was somewhat vague. We did not indicate to the children whether "people I know" referred to children or adults or both. Nevertheless, the results suggest that the results of previous findings are not simply an artifact of income and affluence. Attitudes may change as children get older, but our data suggests that fourth and fifth graders do not think that readers are nerds.

REFERENCES

Bradshaw, T. and Nichols, B. 2004. Reading At risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America. Washington DC: National Endowment for the Arts Research Division Report #46

Zill, N. and Winglee, M. 1990. Who Reads Literature? Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press.

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