

Comic Book Reading, Reading Enjoyment, and Pleasure Reading Among Middle Class and Chapter 1 Middle School Students

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Seventh grade boys in two schools, one middle class and one in which 82% of the students were eligible for Chapter 1 funding were asked about comic book reading. Those who reported more comic book reading also reported more pleasure reading in general, greater reading enjoyment, and tended to do more book reading. There was no difference in frequency of comic book reading between the two schools.

Contrary to the view of some writers (Wertham, 1954), research shows that comic book readings does not replace other kinds of reading. Comic book readers, in general, read as much as non-comic book readers (Witty, 1941; Heisler, 1947; Bailyn, 1959; Swain, 1978) and the results of one study suggest they read more (Blakely, 1958). Krashen (1993) suggests that comic book reading and other kinds of light reading may serve as an important bridge from everyday "conversational" language to what Cummins (1991) terms "academic language." This view is supported by studies showing that comic book texts contain more rare words than ordinary conversation does (Hayes and Ahrens, 1988), as well as case histories of readers who credit comic books with providing them with the linguistic basis for reading more difficult texts (e.g. Mathabane, 1986).

To our knowledge, all previous studies of comic book reading have been done with middle class children. In this paper, we examine comic book reading in two middle schools of different socio-economic class, one middle class and one less affluent, in order to determine the extent to which comic book reading varies with social class. If comics are less available for these children, it may help explain the oft-observed social class differences in literacy development (e.g. Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins and Kolstad, 1993). A second goal of the study was to further examine the relationship between comic book reading, book reading, and reading enjoyment.

Method

Sample I (Chapter 1): 302 seventh graders (86% of the seventh grade class) from a middle school in a city near Los Angeles provided information about their comic book reading. Students filled out a questionnaire in their English class that probed comic book reading, book reading, amount of pleasure reading in general, and reading enjoyment. The school qualified for Chapter 1 funding; 82.2% of the children were eligible for free or reduced price meals. 28% of the students were

classified as Limited English Proficient.

Sample II (middle class): 269 seventh grade students from a middle school in a suburb of Los Angeles filled out the same questionnaire as the children in sample 1. Only 30.5% of the children in this school were eligible for free or reduced price meals. Nearly all were native speakers of English; only 3.8% were classified as Limited English Proficient. Included in the sample were 156 students enrolled in a program for gifted students, and 136 "regular" students.

Table 1

How often do you read comics?

chapter 1:

	always	sometimes	never
boys	25% (35)	57% (81)	18% (25)
girls	1% (2)	44% (71)	55% (88)

middle class:

	always	sometimes	never
boys	19% (26)	64% (89)	17% (24)
girls	5% (8)	50% (77)	44% (31)

Results

Inspection of the data revealed that in both schools boys were much more involved in comic book reading than girls; in fact, about half of the girls in both samples indicated that they never read comic books (table1) and very few read them "always." The difference between boys and girls was statistically significant in both samples (sample I: chi square = 64.171, df = 2, p < .001; sample I:

chi square = 9.289, df = 2, $p < .01$). We thus restricted our analysis to the boys, as the girls' responses would not produce enough variability to reveal relationships between comic book reading and other variables.

A recent survey (Comic Shop News, 1994) produced similar results. Out of 2838 replies to a voluntary poll, 93.8% were from males. Readership of Comic Shop News and willingness to respond to such a poll is a good indicator of strong interest in comic book reading.

There was no significant difference in frequency of comic book reading between the two schools (chi square = 1.711, df = 2).

Comic Book Reading and Reading for Pleasure:

For boys in both groups, more comic book reading was strongly associated with more pleasure reading (table 2; for chapter 1, chi square = 14.922, df = 4, $p < .01$; for middle class, chi square = 18.912, df = 4, $p < .001$).

Table 2

How often do you read for pleasure?

chapter 1:

	daily	weekly	monthly/never
heavy comic book readers	54% (19)	34% (12)	11% (4)
occasional comic readers	40% (32)	28% (23)	32% (26)
non comic readers	16% (4)	20% (5)	64% (16)

middle class:

	daily	weekly	monthly/never
heavy comic book readers	65% (17)	27% (7)	8% (2)

occasional comic readers	35% (31)	35% (31)	30% (27)
non comic readers	33% (8)	17% (4)	50% (12)

Table 3

Do you like to read?

chapter 1:	yes	only when I have nothing better to do	no
heavy comic book readers	34% (12)	54% (19)	11% (4)
occasional comic readers	31% (25)	54% (44)	15% (12)
non comic readers	4% (1)	44% (11)	52% (13)
middle class:	yes	only when I have nothing better to do	no
heavy comic book readers	62% (16)	27% (7)	11% (3)
occasional comic readers	40% (36)	40% (36)	19% (17)
non comic readers	21% (5)	37% (9)	42% (10)

Comic Book Reading and Reading Enjoyment:

For boys in both schools, more comic book reading was significantly associated with more reading enjoyment (chapter 1; chi square = 21.196, df = 4, $p < .001$; middle class; chi square = 12.000, df = 4, $p < .025$).

Comic Book Reading and Book Reading:

For boys in both schools, more comic book reading was associated with more book reading, with the relationship falling just short of statistical significance in the chapter 1 school (chi square = 5.392, df = 2, $p < .10$) and reaching significance in the middle class school (chi square = 6.505, df = 2, $p < .05$).

Summary and Conclusions

There was no difference in frequency of comic book reading between a middle class and a less affluent sample of seventh grade boys. For both groups, those who read more comic books did more pleasure reading, liked to read more, and tended to read more books. These results show that comic book reading certainly does not inhibit other kinds of reading, and is consistent with the hypothesis that comic book reading facilitates heavier reading.

Table 4

Do you read books?

chapter 1:

	yes	no
heavy comic book readers	49% (17)	51% (18)
occasional comic readers	60% (49)	40% (32)
non comic readers	32% (8)	68% (17)

middle class:

	yes	no
heavy comic book readers	69% (18)	31% (8)
occasional comic readers	71% (63)	29% (26)

Our results, however, leave us with some questions. Surprisingly, children from the chapter 1 school reported just as much comic book reading as more affluent children. Comics are very expensive, typically costing \$1.00 to \$1.50. Either these children have found a less expensive source, or, despite the cost, they are buying them, which is evidence for the attractiveness of comics.

We did not attempt to determine whether comic book readers are better readers, but there is reason to suspect that they are; given the consistent relationship found in the professional literature between frequency of reading and reading ability (Krashen, 1993), and the finding that comic book readers like reading more and read more.

We also found that chapter 1 boys are not, however, reading as much in general as boys from the middle class school, nor do they enjoy reading as much. One reason this is true, we suspect, is that reading material is not as readily available to the less affluent. Despite this lack of access, however, comic book readers from the chapter 1 school still manage to read more than their peers, and even read more than non comic book readers from the middle class school (e.g. Chapter 1 heavy comic readers read significantly more than middle class non comic readers; data from table 2. chi square = 10.806, df = 2, $p < .01$). More access to books, we predict, would result in even greater differences between comic and noncomic book readers for less affluent children.

Finally, we did not attempt to determine which comic books were read. There is large variability in reading level of comic books. Archie, for example, is written at the second grade level, while some of the superhero comics are written at the fifth and sixth grade level (Wright, 1979). It remains to be determined whether different kinds of comic book reading relate to school environment, book reading, and reading ability.

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