

MIDDLE SCHOOL BOYS (DIS)ENGAGEMENT
WITH LITERATURE

By:

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ABSTRACT

When boys enter the early middle school years, typically 5th or 6th grade, they begin to lose interest in reading. The engagement they once had fades away and is replaced by a defiance surrounding reading. This research project was conducted through a phenomenological method and primarily used survey questions and observations for data collection. The study includes a 10-week reading project with 7th graders as well as a survey of 47 students to understand their lived experiences with literature. Student responses to survey questions were analyzed and brought into conversation with other scholarly works. The findings revealed that disengagement from literature is not exclusive to male students. While boys were less likely to identify as “readers,” a significant number of females also reported losing interest in reading during the early middle school years. This study also found that while students are still reading, the medium has changed. In particular, there is an increase in engagement with social media, video game instructions, and subtitles. This paper concludes that to combat disengagement, educators need to redefine “reading” to include alternative forms as well as allow for student autonomy in their reading.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, educators have observed that students, particularly boys, have lost interest in reading (Von Hippel et al 2023). This disinterest in literature generally begins in the early years of middle school. A study from 1999 states that, “At the age of 10, 15.8% of boys declared themselves to be non-book readers . . . 33.2% at the age of 12 . . . and 40% at 14.” (Telford). More recently, the 2022 Scholastic *Kids and Family Reading Report* explains how 70% of students ages 6-8 state that they “love reading” or “like it a lot.” By the time these individuals reach the ages of 12-17, only 46% have that same passion for reading (Scholastic). As boys get older, their interest in reading drastically falls. Given the rapid pace of societal progress, educators must continually modernize their instruction, ensuring that students remain engaged and feel a personal stake in their learning.

Over the past century, the way male students interact with literature has drastically changed. During the early to mid-20th century, literature was very application-driven. Boys were encouraged to read texts they could directly apply to their everyday lives, such as manuals and short adventure stories (Kaestle 1991). A shift occurred during the mid to late 20th century, one where schools promoted reading for pleasure, mainly action and adventure books that engaged the male reader, think *The Hardy Boys*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Reading was culturally accepted and encouraged for boys at this time. Over the previous 20-30 years, there has once again been a shift in the reading habits of boys, driven by both societal norms and past-time hobbies. With the rise of technology, primarily video games and television, competition for boys' attention has grown. Many young boys now prioritize spending time on these technologies rather than reading, most notably video games such as Minecraft or Fortnite, or short-reel format apps like Instagram or TikTok. On top of that, there has been a social shift where it is now considered weird and unusual if a boy enjoys reading more than playing sports or spending their time playing video games with friends (Angelina et al, 2024). This social shift is most prevalent in middle school atmospheres, where students are increasingly concerned with their social placement and what others think of them.

In 1930, the *Journal of Social Hygiene* surveyed 1,600 young girls, asking them about their favorite pastime. Overwhelmingly, reading was top of the list, followed by swimming and dressmaking. A similar survey was done in 1914 on 933 boys; once again, their favorite recreational activity was reading (McDowell 2009). Surveys done in recent years have proved that reading is no longer a top recreational activity for either boys or girls, but boys tend to have a much higher hesitancy to reading than their female counterparts (Schaeffer 2021). On top of societal issues, this is alarming for the educational world because reading for enjoyment typically puts children ahead in the classroom (Scholes et al. 2021). With a decrease in reading comes a decrease in overall achievement in school (Iyengar 2024). This disinterest in literature is important because, as educators, we want to prepare and educate our students as best we can; this can only be done if we understand why our male students are disinterested in literature and learn how to combat this issue in the classroom.

Exigency

After my first year of teaching middle school English, I noticed that my male students were hesitant and oftentimes defiant when it came to reading, both personal reading and in-class reading. I did not necessarily notice this in my female students, at least not at face value. This surprised me because, as a lifelong lover of reading, a male one at that, I could not understand where this disengagement from reading came from. It then became my goal as an educator to not only understand this disengagement but also to try to actively combat it.

The following year of teaching, I tried many different ways to engage my students with reading; some methods worked, and some failed miserably. On top of trying to engage my students, I set out to understand their viewpoints through multiple surveys. This study is based primarily on one major survey I conducted at the end of the 2024/25 school year, but it will also include findings from my other ventures. It is important to note that I teach Advanced English as well as general English, both at the 7th-grade level. Because of this, I have students from all over the literary spectrum.

Research Questions

- 1: What causes boys in middle school to begin disengaging from school?
 - a: Why do boys in middle school lose interest in literature?
- 2: In what ways do boys view literature and reading differently from girls?
- 3: What can educators do to both combat and prevent disengagement?

Limitations of Study

As I dove deeper into my research questions for the primary survey and read relevant literature, it became apparent that declining interest in literature among middle school boys was a larger issue than I had originally anticipated. It is a topic that many other educators and researchers have studied. This realization benefited me because I was then able to use their preexisting findings and use them to better shape my research. The challenge with my research, however, was to keep my research directly aligned with my questions and avoid veering off to various subtopics that I found along the way. My survey questions were directly tied to my research questions, and pursuing topics such as how home economics or access to literature outside of school affects reading interest was avoided. If I stretched my research too thin, I

would not have any substantial findings on my research questions. The goal was to discuss a few research questions in depth, instead of touching on too many topics at a baseline level.

There were certain limitations to this study, primarily related to a small cite and sample size. The research was conducted only on 7th graders in a single school district. Because of this, responses were subject to being confined to an individual community. Further research can be done by implementing the same research method and structure in communities across the state, or even across the country. By doing this, the sampling size would increase, allowing for more diverse answers and experiences.

I focused my research on middle school students, specifically 7th grade. I did that for two reasons. First, I am a 7th-grade ELA teacher, so these are the students I am most familiar with, and they are comfortable with my presence and trust me as an authoritative figure, or at least I hope so. At the point of the survey, I had spent the better half of a school year building and fostering professional relationships with my students/survey participants. I realize that with this comfort level, however, there is potential for inherent bias as a researcher. During data collection and analysis, I ensured that all data was viewed through a non-biased lens to ensure complete transparency of responses. The second reason I focused on 7th graders is that this appears to be the most impactful age range when an interest in literature and reading is lost. From my initial observations as an educator, disinterest begins in the early middle school age, but amplifies as the student progresses into 7th grade.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

Although many different method types could have been used for this research project, the method of phenomenology proved to be most useful and appropriate. This method focuses on a specific phenomenon observed by the researcher and emphasizes participants' personal, lived experiences. In this instance, the phenomenon is a difference in views on reading by male and female students of middle school age. Because these viewpoints could be derived from differing lived experiences, phenomenology worked quite well.

Phenomenology

Once I began teaching middle school English, I noticed what I considered, and still do consider to be a phenomenon: my male students are not interested in reading. My female students, however, are open to reading in class and are compliant when I ask/tell them to read, whether that be inside or outside the classroom. Each student in my classroom had a different view of reading, and I was curious what made each student so different in this field. This issue quickly became the phenomenon that I would base my research around and try to better understand.

For my research study, I primarily used a method of phenomenology. This is simply a qualitative research approach that focuses on the lived experiences of individuals to understand phenomena as they have viewed and experienced them (Stolz 2023). Through phenomenology, the researcher focuses on gathering detailed and expansive data points through in-depth surveys and then analyzes the data to identify and discuss common themes throughout the responses (Moustakas 1994). Since the researcher is often the person who notices the specific phenomenon, they need to remain neutral and set aside any personal biases to stay true to their findings.

Phenomenology seeks to describe and interpret human experiences as they are perceived by individuals (Creswell, Poth 2018). This approach assumes that for individuals, reality does not hold a single objective truth, but rather a culmination of experiences that reveal and share deeper meanings of the individual's lived experiences. In the context of this study, phenomenology provides a framework for understanding boys' lived experiences with reading, how they perceive, value, and emotionally respond to literature within the classroom setting. It also allows for comparisons to be made between boys' lived experiences with reading and girls' experiences. Most likely, since these students are from the same town, they will have similar views on other aspects of life, so phenomenology allows me as the researcher to hone in specifically on their view of reading. Unlike a case study or experimental method, phenomenology does not attempt to manipulate variables but instead allows patterns to emerge organically from participants' own words and reflections (Stolz, 2023).

An example of the phenomenological method in practice is The Digital Reading Experiences of Middle School Readers: A Phenomenological Study by Laura Hayward (2019). Similar to this study, Hayward focuses on reading, but specifically students' engagement with digital reading, a topic of this study, but not the entire focus. Hayward investigated how students

interact with digital reading in comparison to traditional forms through multiple phenomenological means. Most notably, the use of in-depth interviews to gather information on the participants' lived experiences with digital and traditional reading. Many methodical connections can be made between this study and Hayward's.

Originally, when thinking about the methods for this research, I planned on using an ethnographic method. I had initially thought that ethnography would best fit this study because this method collects data through observation and surveys, which are then used to conclude how individuals function within society (UVA). After further research, however, it became apparent that ethnographic research only briefly touches on the complexities of the issue at hand and on my participants' individual experiences. To not allow for the interpretation of my students' individual experiences would be doing them an injustice. It is for these reasons that I decided to use the phenomenology method instead.

Under the larger scope of phenomenology, I also used surveying and textual analysis in my research. For the sake of this paper, textual analysis is defined as using prior works in the field as a basis for the study, to add additional points of conversation. Surveying is defined as providing students with a Google Poll with questions regarding their interest or disinterest in reading. This Google Poll is the primary means of data collection for the study. Textual analysis provides a means of deriving meaning from a text by engaging with it. Given that many other researchers have conducted studies on the reading habits, or lack thereof, of middle school boys, examining those studies will enable me to incorporate information that I may not have personally gathered in my own research. Being familiar with similar research projects also allows the formulation of research questions I will ask during my own study. Once this study is complete, a narrative will be built around boys' interactions with literature in comparison to girls'. This

narrative will primarily be built upon survey data, but will also include journal observations I take in class during the process.

All participants in this study acquired parental permission in order to participate. The permission documents fully disclosed who would view the data and ensured that all participants remained confidential. Permission to conduct this research was acquired from the school district.

Being that I was teaching in a middle school at the time of this project, I was surrounded by individuals whom I planned to interview for my research. I built professional relationships with these students over the months, and the comfort they had in my presence allowed for honest and open responses when it came to their engagement in reading. Even though the primary goal for this study was to understand boys' perspectives on reading, I included female students to get an opposing view. These views added to the research by allowing potential opposition and different viewpoints to my findings. I was very aware of keeping my research precise and not diluting my findings.

Theory

This study uses the social identity theory. This theory suggests that individuals define themselves and their preferences by seeking validity from certain social groups (Trepte, Loy 2017). This validity will either encourage or deter a young adolescent from reading, depending on the group they are seeking validity from. The culmination of seeking validity from peers, in addition to the societal shift of thinking it is weird for boys to enjoy reading, has been a major

factor in the recent disengagement (Angelina et al, 2024). Social identity theory fits this study well because although there are many different factors to students disengaging from not only reading but school as a whole, the social norms and expectations of a typical middle schooler hold the most significance when it comes to their behavior (Gronborg 2013).

The Survey

Being that I work in a middle school, I was easily able to acquire permission from the school's administration to conduct my research. I then began the process of creating permission slips for my roughly 120 students to take home to their parents or guardians. During this time frame, I told my students what I was asking of them and asked that they seriously consider participating in my research. The only compensation they would receive is a piece of candy of their choosing. After I sent home a parent/guardian email and permission slip, I had 47 students bring back signed permission slips, more than I was originally expecting. Out of these students, there were 27 girls and 20 boys.

I modeled the survey for this research on a novel study conducted in class over the course of two prior months. Once I had analyzed my findings from this study, I finalized the survey questions and administered the survey to my class. All students were given as much as needed to answer the questions. Once all students were done with the survey, I decided to exclude three students' responses: two of the responses were obvious that the student did not take the questions seriously, and one student answered "prefer not to say" when asked what their gender was,

which, for this project, their responses could not be categorized. In total, that left 19 responses from boys and 25 from girls.

I chose to survey because it was the most efficient way to collect an array of responses in a short period of time, unlike one-on-one interviews, something that I had at one point toyed with implementing. Being that I wanted to focus primarily on students' personal responses, having all of the data online allowed for quick access and effective analysis. As for the specific research questions, I formatted the survey based on my previous research, utilizing techniques from other research projects, my personal observations, and the prior novel study conducted.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding why students begin disengaging from education is crucial; it is multifactorial and manifests in many ways. Engagement is categorized into four determinants: behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social, with the social and behavioral factors being the most prominent (Gronborg 2013). During a student's middle school years, their behavior is closely tied to social aspects of their lives. It is during this time frame that a sharp rise in disengagement from education is seen (Balfanz et al, 2007).

Behavioral engagement refers to students' physical actions in class, such as attendance, participation, and completing assignments. When a student behaviorally disengages, teachers notice patterns of incomplete work or classroom interruptions (Shernoff et al. 2010). Emotional engagement is how students feel about the different aspects of school: their teachers, peers, work done in class, and the books read. For middle school students, negative emotional engagement often leads to a disinterest in reading and most other aspects of schooling, creating an overall sense of disengagement (Guthrie, Wigfield 2020). Cognitive engagement reflects the student's commitment to their work. This includes goal setting and follow-through of completing assignments. Social engagement is the sense of connection and belonging that students feel while at school. This revolves around their relationships with both peers and teachers. During middle school years, social engagement becomes increasingly significant. Many boys report that

maintaining peer relationships sometimes conflicts with fully engaging in academics, leading them to downplay or reject reading to protect their social standing (Gronborg 2013)

Scholars believe that boys' disengagement from school generally stems from two main facets: social pressure from peers and an overall lack of agency in what they learn (Reeve 2016). Many middle-school-aged boys struggle with social acceptance, which can result in disengaging from education to socially 'fit in.' "Being socially accepted, belonging, and fitting in were the foremost concerns among the students, and disengagement was an active strategy to reach this end." (Gronborg 2013). Students struggle to see a way to be socially accepted and simultaneously succeed at school; in their eyes, it is one or the other. Gronborg argues that "Engagement in the social relations went hand in hand with a disengaged attitude toward school activities" (2013). In other words, if a student is primarily worried about and focused on their social status, their attitude towards school often becomes one of disengagement.

For many middle school boys, these years are when they begin thinking about what career paths interest them. If a student decides that their vocation entails using their hands instead of their minds, they begin harboring a resistance towards traditional schooling, such as book learning (Gronborg 2013).

Creation of Disengaged Readers

Across many decades, it has been a common understanding that "girls have always read more, and more widely than boys" (Reynolds 1991). This belief creates a social deterrent for

boys entering their middle school years. This point in a boy's life is often filled with actions that allow them to 'fit in' with their peers. Because of this, "boys' reading habits are strongly shaped by peer pressure" (Telford 2006). Even in today's society, it is still widely believed that reading is more of an activity for girls, which actively creates the reading hesitancy seen in male students (McDowell 2009, Schaeffer 2021).

When society views reading as a feminine activity, it discourages boys from picking up a book and reading for pleasure. Telford argues that in many cases, "some people consider it slightly odd or unusual for boys to enjoy reading (2006). This forces many young boys to either shy away from reading, or do it only in isolation. In this way, reading is "regarded as private, perhaps childish, possibly even faintly embarrassing; something to be enjoyed within the family, but not the sort of thing you discuss with your peers" (Telford 2006). Typically, however, boys are more likely to engage in nonfiction texts, comics, or even digital reading. These reading types are typically not considered suitable for a school setting, as they are "non-educational." This reason amplifies the feeling of having to hide their enjoyment of reading even further.

Kelly Gallagher believes that schools often unintentionally create disengaged readers by "systematically killing the love of reading" (2023). A major reason for this is the educational shift from teaching to create lifelong learners to teaching to develop strong test takers, an initiative passed down from administration to educators. With this shift comes the limiting of authentic and engaging reading experiences (Gallagher 2023). Throughout this process, student motivation is slowly chipped away, creating disengaged learners and readers.

Boys' vs Girls' Engagement With Literature

It is commonly believed that girls read more than boys do (Telford 2023, Wilhelm 2002). There are many reasons for this, with the main one being social expectations and views. Society, as a whole, views reading as an activity for girls, not for boys. Telford states that “some people considered it slightly odd or unusual for boys to enjoy reading” (2006). This is a prevalent theme in middle schools, especially for the sporty and athletic boys. And because of this, when they start thinking independently, boys begin to view literature as feminized. This idea of reading then combines with boys being more susceptible to peer pressure and feeling the need to fit in, leading them to disengage from reading (Wilhelm 2002). If boys in middle school do enjoy reading, it has become an activity done in private, and not one to be shared with others (Telford 2006).

How to Engage Boys in Reading

Since it is apparent that boys generally have less of an interest in reading than girls do, the question then becomes, how do educators best support these reluctant readers? Both Deed and Telford (2008, 2006) argue that to engage boys with reading, two actions must be taken. First, they must find an enjoyment or passion in what is being read, which oftentimes comes with

allowing agency of choice in what they read. Second, boys must be given immediate feedback and validation for what they have read. Typically, this revolves around real-world applications, for example, how to change the oil in a dirtbike. If these two requirements are met, boys will be more open to reading (Deed 2008, Telford 2006).

Anne Simpson discusses how girls like to read simply for the enjoyment of reading, while boys must gain something by reading the book. Simpson believes that boys read for the “acquisition of social power and financial success” and to find value outside of the school context. If this is the case, once again, boys must be given agency in what they read, ensuring this idea of personal agency (Simpson 1996).

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This research project really has two sides to it: an initial study done through a 10-week reading project and the research survey. The research survey was built on the findings from my first reading project. Since both projects are part of the overarching dialogue of this research paper, I will include findings from each one.

Reading Project

To begin this project, I had four copies of 8-10 different novels I passed around, and my students told me their top three choices they wished to read. Students had five minutes to look over each book, read the back, and do a little research on whether it seemed intriguing to them. Once I had everyone's input, I put them in groups of 3-4. Over the semester, each group read its assigned book. They were given each Friday as a reading day (We have shorter classes on Friday). Every other Friday, during the last 30 minutes of class, they discussed the book with their group mates and completed a quick reading check-in assignment. They created a reading

schedule at the beginning of the project to ensure that everyone in the group stays together and no one gets too far ahead. I conducted this study on six classes of 7th-grade English, with one being an accelerated class.

Over the course of the 10 weeks, I took very detailed notes during each class period every Friday. I noted their engagement, discussion, and enjoyment of the book. Every other Friday, students were surveyed to get their personal engagement. They were asked to rank their current interest in the novel on a scale of 1-5. At the end of the project, I analyzed my personal observations and the students' responses.

Reading Project Research Findings

As I had originally anticipated, the students who enjoy reading, about 20% of my students, found the novel study to be intriguing and were engaged throughout the study. About 20% of my students, who are reluctant readers, never found a sense of engagement. The rest of my students, whom I would classify as readers of “average interest,” were neutral to slightly engaged.

After the first novel check-in, I had a baseline of initial interest in the study. The results were as I had expected: roughly 20% of students were very engaged (score of 5), 15-20% of students were disengaged or very disengaged (scores of 1 or 2), and around 60% of students were in the middle (scores of 3 or 4). During the second check-in, two weeks later, I had mixed results. There was roughly a 4% increase from engaged to very engaged, which I was happy to

see. This caused a drop in engaged scores (4), since they were the ones whose scores had primarily changed in the upward direction. On the opposite side of the spectrum, disengagement rose by nearly 2%. From student responses to the survey, individuals who were engaged in the novel found an increase in enjoyment once they really got into the book. Similarly, some students who were on the verge of enjoyment during the first check-in decided they were not engaged halfway through the book. Overall, however, these percentage changes are very minimal; the vast majority of students were on the same level of engagement during both check-ins, with similar rationales.

The final check-in led to results I did not expect. Scores for very engaged and engaged (scores 4 and 5) dropped a combined 13% from the first to the last check-in. Scores for very disengaged and disengaged (scores 1 and 2) increased by a combined 11% from the first to last check-in. Neutral scores (3) remained pretty consistent throughout the study. Student responses for the final check-in really gave no rationale for these changes in scores, so I looked towards my observations. During the last couple of weeks of the study, many of my “very engaged” students had finished their books and had started another one, many without group members. Although I was happy to see students reading more than one book during this study, it did lower their engagement since they were reading on an individual basis and not with their peers. The main observation for the neutral, disengaged, and very disengaged is that during the last couple of weeks, I decided to prioritize other items on Friday instead of the novel study. One of the days was the last day before Spring Break; if we didn’t do something “fun” for at least half of the period, I believed that my 7th-graders would have thrown a fit. Another Friday was the last day of the semester. Because of this, it was the last day for my students to make up missing work, which, not to my surprise, were many of the students who had struggled with engagement. These

students worked hard during the first half of the study to be engaged and at least try to find enjoyment. Once other things got in the way, however, their efforts went elsewhere, and finding enjoyment in reading was the last thing on their minds.

Reading Project to Professional Paper Survey

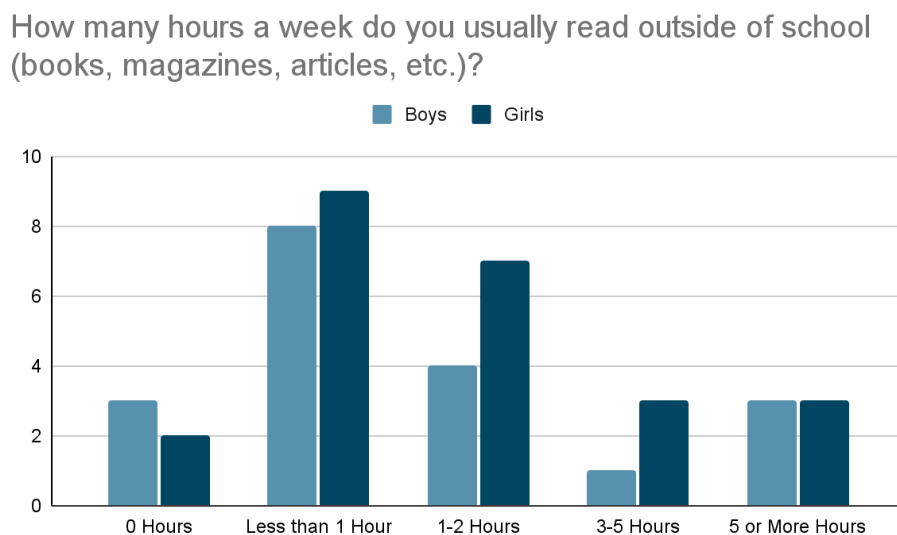
After conducting the reading project, my students' reading habits were fresh in my mind. The students were also not comfortable with discussing books and their personal views of reading. With my findings from the reading project, I created the list of survey questions I would use in the research survey and then began finalizing the details.

Research Survey Findings

During the time of the survey, I had roughly 120 students. Out of these students, 27 girls and 20 boys opted into my research project. During class, however, I had all 120 of my students complete the survey, but I only used the responses from those 47 in my research findings. The other 70 or so responses were analyzed for my own benefit and knowledge, but were not included in this research project.

When asked how many hours each week participants read outside of school, the results were about what I had expected. A majority of students stated that they read less than 1 hour a week or not at all, both male and female. Only four boys and six girls surveyed read more than three hours a week outside of school, while four boys and seven girls read anywhere from 1 to 2 hours each week. For this question, reading was primarily labeled as what would be “academic reading”: books, magazines, articles, anything that historically has been considered something that expands one’s knowledge. This did not focus on other forms of reading, such as movie subtitles, social media posts, video game instructions, etc. These forms of reading were surveyed later.

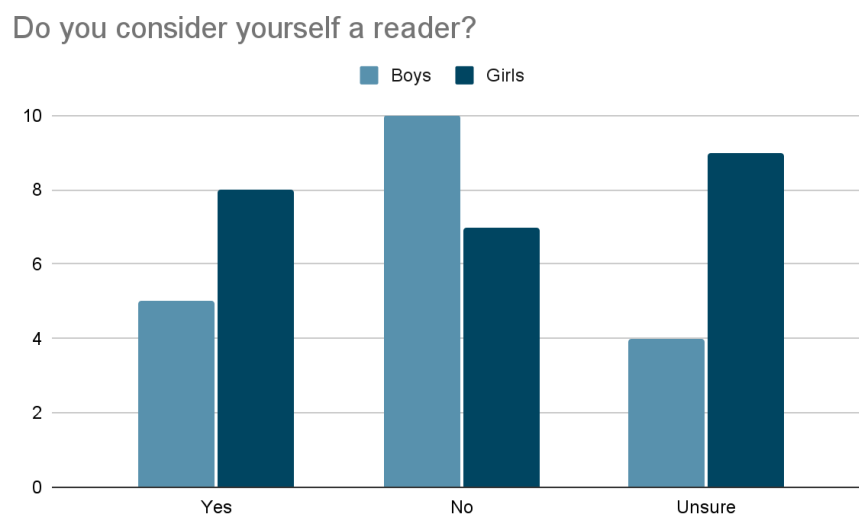
Figure 1: Hours of Reading



Student identity as a reader plays a major role in how frequently they read outside of class (Cremin 2025). If a student considers themselves to be a reader, they will often make the

time to read during their personal time. If they do not consider themselves to be readers, they will most likely never pick up a book and read for fun. Because of this, I asked my survey participants if they considered themselves to be readers. Four boys and nine girls answered that they were “unsure.” It is not clear if participants being unsure of their reading identity stems from confusion about the question, not knowing exactly what considering themselves as a reader means, or if they are quarreling with their reader identity and are unsure if they would consider themselves a reader or not. It is clear, however, that boys are less likely to consider themselves to be readers than their female counterparts. Out of the 19 boys surveyed, only five consider themselves to be readers, while 10 do not. In comparison, out of the 25 girls surveyed, eight consider themselves to be readers, while 7 do not. This theme of identity plays a major role in many other aspects of a middle schooler’s life. If a student considers themselves to be an athlete, they will be more inclined to play sports and exercise outside of school than a peer who doesn’t consider themselves to be an athlete (Anderson 2009).

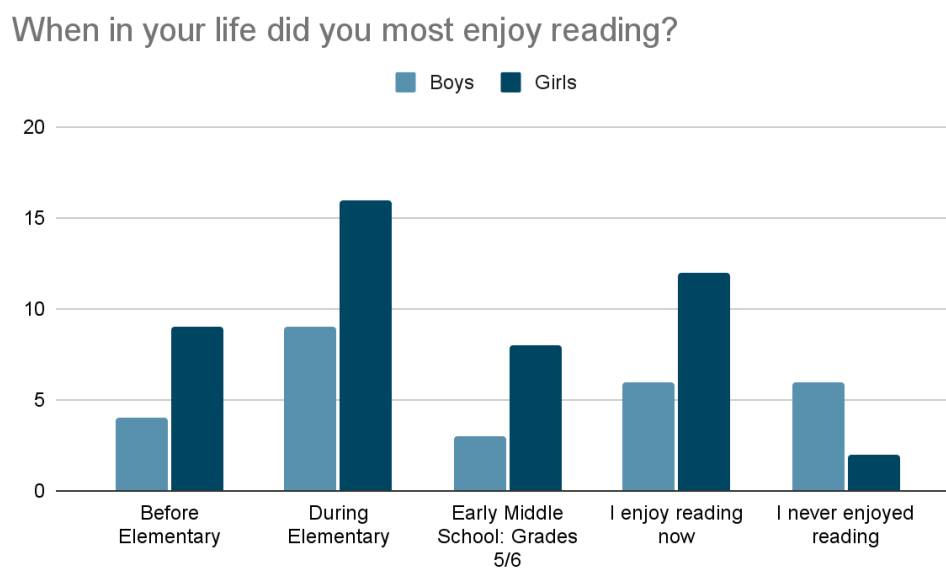
Figure 2: Self-Consideration of Reader



Given my observations of middle school students (the school I teach at includes 5th grade in the middle school), it was my hypothesis that male students enjoy reading until they reach the 6th-7th grade age range, with a peak interest somewhere late in elementary school. Once the middle school ages were hit, I expected an overall decrease in student interest in reading. I expected my female students to have similar interests in reading during elementary school, but for them to be equally interested while in middle school.

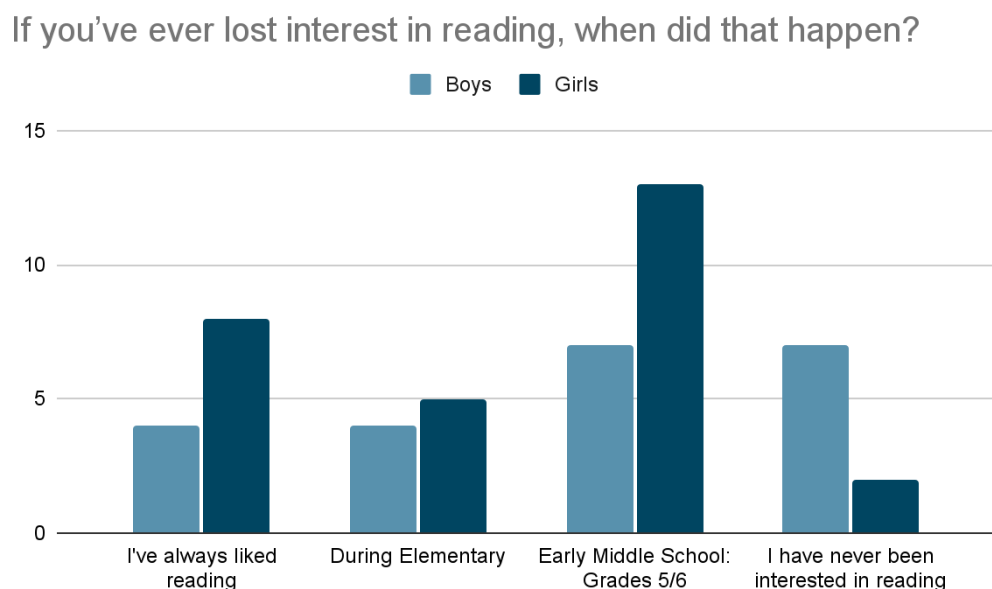
For the survey, participants were asked when in life they most enjoyed reading. Please note that they were able to choose multiple responses to this question, so there will be more responses than individuals surveyed. Participants were also able to respond by stating they still enjoy reading or that they have never enjoyed it. For boys, the majority of participants stated they most enjoyed reading during elementary school, with only four boys responding that they most enjoyed reading in middle school and six responding that they currently enjoy reading. For the girls, there were 16 responses for most enjoying reading in elementary school, eight in middle school, and 12 for responses of still enjoying reading at the moment.

Figure 3: Time in Life of Enjoying Reading



Being that one of the primary goals of this research project is to gauge the interest/disinterest of reading for middle school boys, the question of when an interest in reading was lost holds great importance. Going into the study, I had expected that boys lose interest in reading around the 6th or 7th grade, early middle school, and that girls keep an interest throughout these years. From the survey results, however, it is apparent that both boys *and* girls lose interest in reading around those years. Once again, participants were able to choose multiple responses. Out of the 19 boys surveyed, seven stated losing an interest in reading during the early middle school years, and four during elementary school. Seven male participants also stated never having an interest in reading, while four said they have always enjoyed it. In comparison, out of the 25 females surveyed, 13 stated losing an interest in reading during early middle school, and five in elementary school. Eight female participants stated they have always enjoyed reading, while only 2 never expressed an interest.

Figure 4: Lost Interest in Reading

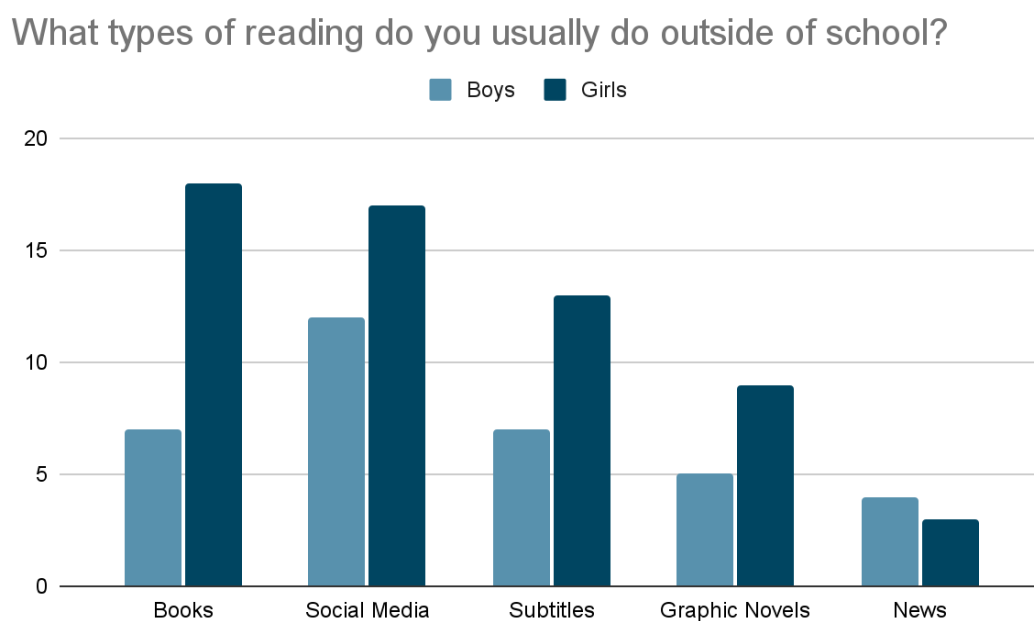


When looking at reading in the current state of society, it is important to understand that the concept of “reading” may look much different than it historically did. For much of literary history, reading was related to a physical book or magazine, with the recent expectations of electronic books and Kindles. Today, however, reading has expanded far past simply picking up a storybook and reading it. Many popular activities now include reading, even though it is in much shorter bursts than a full-length book. Social media posts typically will include 2-5 sentences of description per post. When an individual is on social media for an hour or more, the amount read really adds up. Middle school-aged students are also often reading while watching movies or TV shows through subtitles (Lopukhina 2024).

While there is a rise in alternative modes of reading, for middle school girls, reading books is still their top choice. 18 out of the 25 females surveyed stated that they usually read

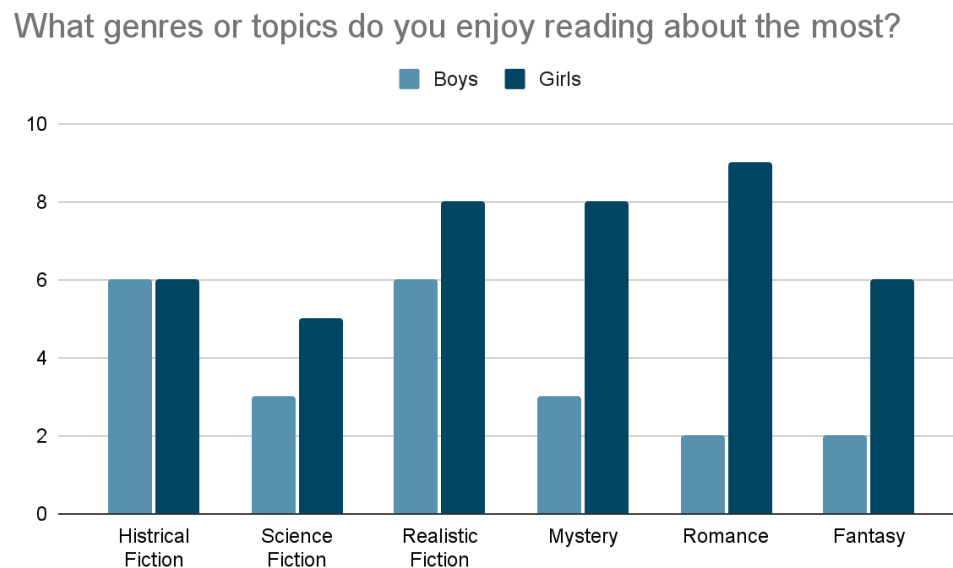
books outside of school. In comparison, only 7 out of the 19 boys surveyed said the same. For boys, most of their reading came through social media, which also includes various modes of reading while playing video games.

Figure 5: Types of Reading Outside of School



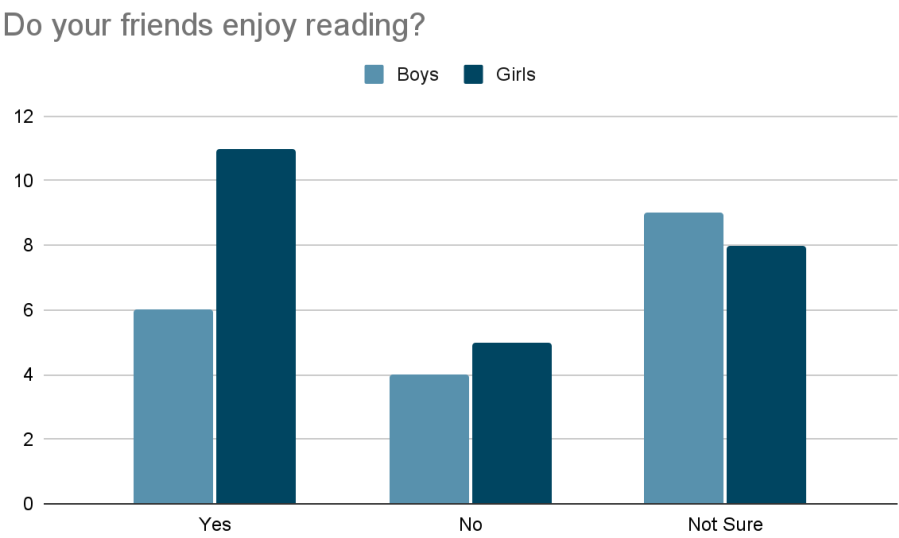
When reading books, females in middle school have a much wider range of genre interests than their male counterparts. They have a strong preference towards genres such as romance, realistic fiction, and mystery. Out of these topics, the only ones that males have much interest in are realistic fiction. For the boys, their interests focused on historical and realistic fiction, both of which females also enjoy.

Figure 6: Reading Topics of Interest



One factor that has a large impact on whether students read outside of the classroom is their social circle (Guthrie, Wigfield 2019). If a peer's friends read and identify as readers, they are more likely to read themselves. If their friends view reading in a negative light, they will be discouraged from reading due to the social consequences. When asked if their friends enjoy reading, 11 out of the 25 females surveyed stated that they did, while only 6 out of the 19 boys surveyed stated that they had friends who read. Only 6 girls and 4 boys answered that their friends do not enjoy reading, a low number given the responses to the other questions in the survey. For this survey question, a large percentage of males and females alike answered that they were unsure whether their friends enjoy reading or not. This shows that many students do not talk about reading outside of school, so they are unsure if their friends enjoy it or not.

Figure 7: Friends’ Enjoyment in Reading



CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Through the survey results, it is apparent that at one point in a student's academic journey, they enjoyed reading. For a lot of students, both male and female, this interest starts to diminish around late elementary to early middle school ages, sometimes around the 5th-6th grade range. The questions of why this happens and how we as educators mitigate this problem then arise.

When I first started this research project, I had initially anticipated that my data would show one main finding: once boys hit the middle school age, they begin to disengage from literature, while their female counterparts of the same age hold onto that interest. This was, after all, my observations in class. My male students, generally, were not interested in reading and were frequently defiant when asked to read in class. They would instead try to find ways to sit there in silence and not participate. There were exceptions to this statement, obviously. I never had this issue with my female students. When asked to read in class, they did so. When I asked, they found a personal book to read during free time or even after school, and they did it. Because of this, I assumed that almost all of my female students enjoyed reading.

After analyzing the data, however, it became apparent that my female students were not as engaged as I had originally anticipated. Out of the 19 boys surveyed, 7 said they lost interest in reading during early middle school. Alarming, 13 out of the 25 female students also said the

same thing. What I had originally thought to be applicable to my male students was also affecting their female counterparts, proving that the disinterest I noticed was not just an issue with boys in middle school, but middle schoolers as a whole. This idea was also shown in many of the articles I used as references for this study, but I since I had not experienced this behaviour first hand, I had not expected to observe it in my data.

After looking back through my observation notes, I believe I found the reason why I had originally thought my female students were engaged: simple compliance. Male students are typically more prone to argue with their teachers than female students, which, at times, caused the defiance I noticed when asking them to read. Female students are simply more compliant at this age. They may not want to do what is asked of them by their teachers, like reading a book, but they will do it because they are compliant and often afraid of the consequences. When I saw them engaging with their reading, I assumed it was because they still engaged with and enjoyed literature, not that they were simply doing what was asked of them and trying to be a good student. This discrepancy between male and female student behavior is not only apparent in my classroom; it's a common observation across the U.S. (Morris and Brea 2016).

There is a positive to these survey results, and that is the fact that even though the traditional view of reading may be obsolete to middle schoolers, they are still finding ways to incorporate reading into their daily lives. Many middle school boys are getting their reading in through the different forms of social media. They are reading their friend's posts, instructions for video game hacks, and dialogue during gaming. While this might not be the traditional reading that educators like to see, at least they are getting in bits of reading throughout their day. Middle school girls also do a lot of reading through social media and subtitles, but they are also more

inclined to read a book. Their time spent reading ranges from subtitles, graphic novels, social media, and books.

Since it is obvious that this disinterest in reading is not gender specific, the question arises of how educators can combat it and try to instill an interest in literature into their students. First, student choice in what they read is crucial to fostering engaged readers (McGeown 2020). Allowing time for students to research which books interest them before beginning a novel study, similar to the one I discuss, provides their voices and opinions to be heard. If students have strong opinions on which books they should be allowed to choose from, hopefully, the school district will help acquire those books. Second, society, and education in general, must change the way alternative forms of reading are viewed. It may not be how most teachers were raised and taught to view reading, but even if a student is not reading an entire novel, instead reading social media posts, how-to guides for video games, or subtitles for movies, it must be viewed as educational and beneficial to their learning.

In the end, if a student is dead set on not reading a book or participating in a novel study, they won't, similar to some of my male students. If a student reluctantly reads the words on the pages but isn't engaged, they aren't benefiting from the reading either. If teachers want to have a classroom of engaged readers, it is crucial to understand their students' views on reading and how they interact with it daily. To combat this issue and to try to once again engage students with reading, there are a few action steps that must be completed by educators and administration alike.

First, it must be understood that all students are readers; they just present that identity in many different ways. Some students will devour hardback books, and others wouldn't touch one with a ten-foot pole. Then there are students whose reading identity comes from reading forums

or how-to instructions for video games. Regardless of how a student consumes literature, it must still be considered reading and a positive action. This allows for the expansion of what is considered to be “academic reading.”

Along these lines, if a teacher wants to engage their students with reading, there needs to be student agency in what they read, as well as well-organized and engaging class novel studies. Allowing student choice in reading lets their independent values and interests shine through. It lets each student read whatever they like, even if it is a novel multiple grade levels below their ability. For this, as long as a student is reading something, it is considered a success. It is also important to balance this independent choice with classroom novels. These novels, however, are to be chosen based on many factors, with the most important being student interest. For my classroom, these novels are “*The Giver*” and “*The Outsiders*.” Although not every student is going to enjoy reading these books, at the end of the unit, most have positive things to say. And finally, for individual student reading choice to take place, a school needs an array of available literature, both physical and virtual. Although teachers try to fill their classrooms with the right literature, they will never have enough options to suit everyone’s needs. The school library not only needs to be easily accessible to students, but have a variety of engaging texts for every type of reader.

The world around us is rapidly changing. Students’ engagement is being pulled in so many different directions and the competition for their time is fierce. Educators need to find ways to incorporate reading into as many of these different avenues as possible. If this is done, the lifelong reader can still be created.

Artificial Intelligence Note

With the advancements of artificial intelligence (AI), different use cases have been presenting themselves in education. Being that I follow AI quite closely, I have implemented it into many different aspects of my life, one of which is education: sparingly, that is. Tools like ChatGPT have replaced the need for peer reviewers and personal backboards for ideas. For this paper, I used ChatGPT as a tool just as I would use a professor or a classmate. I used AI to give me expansion ideas when I was stuck on a certain section, just as I would ask a professor for ideas. AI also played a role in my research analysis when it came to analyzing the numbers I received from my survey. Asking ChatGPT to sort and number the responses was much quicker than having to do it myself. What AI did not do for me, however, was write any parts of this paper. There are no sections that were written by AI, something that I would consider to be academically dishonest and plagiarism. At most, sections were expanded by using the advice that AI gave me.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

	Question	Response Options
1	Gender	- Male - Female - Prefer not to Say

2	How many hours a week do you usually read outside of school (books, magazines, articles, etc.)?	- 0 hours - Less than 1 hour - 1-2 hours - 3-5 hours - More than 5 hours
3	Where do you read more often?	- In school - Outside of school - About the same - I don't read much in either setting
4	Why do you read outside of school? (Check all that apply)	- For fun - Because I have to (homework, assignments) - To learn more about things I'm interested in - To improve my reading, vocabulary, or writing - I don't usually read outside of school
5	What types of reading do you usually do outside of school? (Check all that apply)	- Books - Graphic novels or comics - Magazines - News or articles online - Subtitles (movies, shows) - Social media (posts, captions, etc.)
6	What genres or topics do you enjoy reading about the most? (Check all that apply)	- Science fiction - Fantasy - Mystery - Historical fiction - Romance - Memoir or true stories - Graphic novels/comics - Realistic fiction - Nonfiction (informational) - I'm not sure
7	Do you consider yourself a reader?	- Yes - No - Not Sure
8	Please explain your above answer.	- (Open response format)
9	Do your friends enjoy reading?	- Yes - No

		- Not Sure
10	Do you believe reading is important for your future?	- Yes - No - Not Sure
11	Please explain your above answer.	- (Open response format)
12	When in your life did you most enjoy reading?	- Before elementary school - During elementary school - Early middle school: grades 5-6 - I enjoy reading now - I've never really enjoyed reading
13	What did you enjoy about reading during that time?	- (Open response format)
14	If you've ever lost interest in reading, when did that happen?	- I've always liked reading - Elementary school - Early middle school: grade 5-6 - I've never really been interested in reading
15	Why do you think you still have or have lost an interest in reading?	- (Open response format)
16	Do you feel like you get to choose what you read often enough in school?	- Yes - No - Sometimes
17	What could help make reading more enjoyable or interesting for you?	- (Open response format)

Appendix B: Reading Project Check-In Observations:

Engagement Score	Descriptor	Key Themes / Reasons	Representative Student Quotes
5	Very Engaged	- Fast-paced or action-driven plot - Strong emotional connection to characters - Personal interest in genre/topic - Preference for independent reading	- “I love books about war...” (<i>All Quiet on the Western Front</i>) - “It’s funny and suspenseful, and I love the mythology.” (<i>Percy Jackson</i>) - “It’s about a girl surviving on her own. I like how smart she is.” (<i>Where the Crawdads Sing</i>)
4	Engaged	- Enjoyed specific moments or characters - Perceived potential for increased interest - Environmental factors affecting focus	- “It’s interesting, but it jumps around too much.” (<i>Ghost</i>) - “I like the plot, but the classroom is too noisy.” (<i>Percy Jackson</i>)
3	Nuetral	- Mixed reactions - Mismatch in expectations or style - Uncertainty about engagement	- “It’s kind of interesting but kind of boring.” (<i>Bridge to Terabithia</i>) - “I like some parts, but it’s slow.” (<i>Tuck Everlasting</i>) - “It has its good and bad moments.” (<i>Ghost</i>)

2	Disengaged	- Boring or confusing narrative - Weak connection to theme or setting - Unmet genre expectations	- “Too much going on, not enough I care about.” (<i>The Hobbit</i>) - The theme is confusing, and it switches too much.” (<i>All the Light We Cannot See</i>)
1	Very Disengaged	- Strong dislike of genre or pacing - Lack of choice - Perceived irrelevance or outdated text	- “It sucked. Not reading this book.” (<i>Summer of the Monkeys</i>) - “I don’t like it. It’s boring and weird.” (<i>Shadow Jumper</i>) - “It was made when George Washington was alive.” (<i>Summer of the Monkeys</i>)

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