

Reading for Joy

As meat is to the body, so reading is to the soul. – Seneca

When children read well, they have a solid foundation for learning in every subject and they are able to open the door to possibilities and adventures that go far beyond their own experiences.

Literacy – alongside writing and math – has been at the centre of Ontario’s educational agenda for more than a decade. And while Ontario students’ literacy scores have improved during that time,¹ something unexpected has also happened: There has been a dramatic decline in the percentage of Ontario students who report that they “like to read.”

EQAO surveys show sharp decline in students’ reading enjoyment

Every year, all Ontario students in grades 3 and 6 fill in surveys along with standardized tests in reading, writing and mathematics administered by the province’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). The surveys ask a wide range of questions, including whether students “like to read.”

The results for 2010/11 confirmed a worrying trend.

Since 1998/99, the percentage of students in grade 3 who report they like to read has declined by almost a third, from 76% in 98/99 to only 50% in 2010/11. There has been a similar decline for grade 6 students, from 65% in 98/99 to 50% in 2010/11.²

This significant decline may have an immediate and lasting impact on Ontario students.

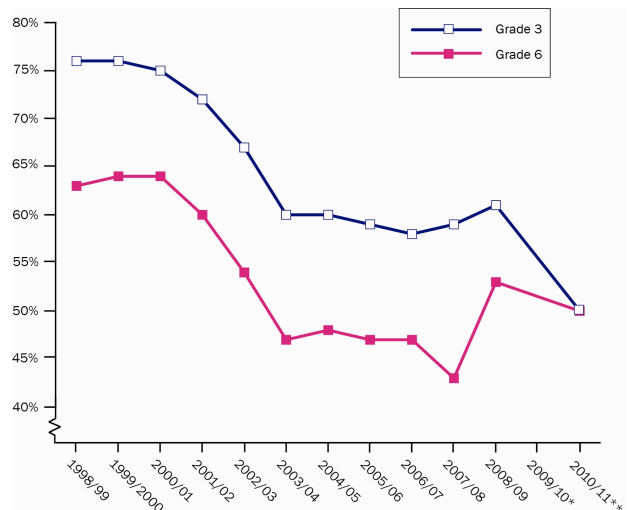
Reading enjoyment affects achievement, social and civic engagement

International studies show that students with a more positive attitude toward reading tend to be more successful in all subjects.³ They are more likely to read more and to seek deeper knowledge and consequently develop deeper conceptual understandings of the subject matter.⁴

QUICK FACTS

- The percentage of grade 3 students who report they “like to read” has declined from 76% in 1998/99, to 50% in 2010/11.
- In grade 6, the percentage of students who say they “like to read” has declined from 65% in 1998/99 to 50% in 2010/11.

Percentage of students in grades 3 and 6 who report they “like to read”



* Students were not asked if they “like to read” in 2010

** In 2010/11, students were asked whether they liked to read “most of the time,” “sometimes” or “never.” We are following the interpretation of EQAO in the 2010/11 Provincial Report, which treats the response “most of the time” as the same as “yes.” See p.10.

According to OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), students’ enjoyment of reading is one of the most important individual characteristics that predict higher achievement.⁵ Enjoyment of reading doesn’t only affect a student’s literacy scores; it is also a predictor of their success in science and math. The most recent PISA report found that in results of tests of 15-year-olds “in all countries – except Kazakhstan – students who enjoy reading the most perform significantly better than students who enjoy reading the least.”⁶

And reading enjoyment is not only associated with high student achievement. Research shows that “engaged” readers are also more likely to be socially and civically engaged as well.⁷

Reading enjoyment permeates school life

Reading is integral to nearly all learning and takes up a considerable part of every school day.⁸

If, as the EQAO data show, half of Ontario’s grade 3 and 6 students don’t enjoy reading, this may have an impact on their overall attitude toward learning which can last a lifetime.

According to the OECD, students’ attitudes toward learning can be as important as their grasp of specific knowledge and skills. Students’ attitudes and motivation affect their “quality of life during their adolescence, and can influence their decision to pursue further education or their capacity to seize labour market opportunities...many adults with little interest in learning blame their lack of motivation on bad experiences at school in their early years.”⁹

Libraries and teacher-librarians affect students’ enjoyment of reading

Research also shows that certain school-based factors can have a positive effect on students’ enjoyment of reading. And school libraries stand out as a largely untapped resource when it comes to building students’ joy of reading.

Many studies have shown a relationship between students’ performance on tests and their access to school libraries.¹⁰ But, perhaps even more important, research by People for Education with Queen’s

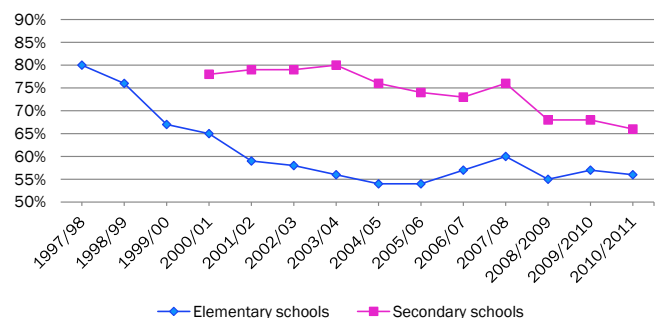
Reading makes immigrants of us all. It takes us away from home, but most important, it finds homes for us everywhere.

— Hazel Rochman

QUICK FACTS

- Only 56% of elementary schools had a teacher-librarian in 2010/11—eighty percent of them part-time—compared to 76% in 1998/99.
- 66% of secondary schools had a teacher-librarian in 2010/11, just over half full-time, down from 78% in 2000/01.

Ontario schools with teacher-librarians, full- or part-time



University that compiled EQAO surveys from 53,000 grade 3 and 6 students showed that in schools with teacher-librarians, the students were more likely to report that they “liked to read.”¹¹ In fact, schools with teacher-librarians had reading enjoyment scores that were 8 percentile points higher than average. Unfortunately, the percentage of elementary and secondary schools with teacher-librarians continues to decline in Ontario.

In 2010/11, only 56% of elementary schools had a teacher-librarian (eighty percent of them part-time), a number that has fallen steadily from 76% in 1998/99. Only 66% of secondary schools had teacher-librarians, just over half full-time, down from 78% in 2000/01.¹²

Reading at home for fun builds good readers

Another way schools can foster enjoyment of reading is by encouraging parents to read with their children *for pleasure*. But even here, schools may be giving parents the wrong messages.

Becoming a good reader is a complex process.¹³ Part of that process is the acquisition of skills like letter-sound correspondence and decoding, which are rightfully the focus of early reading instruction at school. But to learn to read beyond initial levels, students need exposure to oral and written language, background knowledge and motivation. This is where reading at home for pleasure can play a major role.

Parents’ main contribution to their children becoming successful readers is not by teaching technical skills.¹⁴ Children can develop motivation, comprehension and strong oral language skills through conversation and reading for pleasure—in any language¹⁵—either with their parents or by themselves. As important as decoding skills, these activities are the foundations for successful literacy in primary years and beyond.¹⁶

But it is possible that in our drive to improve the mechanical aspects of literacy, we have turned reading at home into an extension of school work. This is not necessarily the best way to increase student’s motivation to read.

When you sell a man a book you don’t sell just twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue — you sell him a whole new life. Love and friendship and humour and ships at sea by night — there’s all heaven and earth in a book, a real book.

— Christopher Morley

Fewer students today are reading for pleasure, even though daily reading for pleasure is associated with better performance in school and with adult reading proficiency. The challenge for parents and educators is to instil a sense of pleasure in reading by providing reading materials that students find interesting and relevant.

— PISA in Focus 2011

QUICK FACT

— Only 21% of Ontario children in grade 3 report that they read together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day”.

Throughout the history of narrative arts, storytelling has always adapted to these changing forms and technologies, and has managed to not only survive, but begin anew each time, introducing a whole other generation to the possibilities of reading. The Kindle, the iPad, these are just variations of a need we have as a civilization, as a species, to use our imagination, and this need is as important in this time as any other.”

— Joe Meno, *A book is a place*

Perhaps the most important thing schools could be doing is to get the message out more clearly to parents that reading at home *for pleasure* is vital to children’s long term success. EQAO survey results show that in 2010/11, only 21% of Ontario’s grade 3 students report reading together with a parent or guardian “every day or almost every day.”¹⁷

Reading today: more than books

Obviously there are many other factors that may have affected students’ relationship with the written word, including technology and social media. It is clear that teenagers, for example, are reading far more online than ever before.¹⁸ Over the past two years, EQAO has started to ask students what they read outside of school. Last year, almost half of students in grade 6 read emails, texts or instant messages every day or almost every day. But there is no reason to assume that reading online necessarily means a decrease in enjoyment or achievement.

PISA results show that fifteen year-olds who are extensively engaged in online reading activities, such as reading e-mails, chatting on line, reading news on line, using an online dictionary or encyclopaedia, participating in online group discussions and searching for information online, are generally more proficient readers than students who do little online reading.¹⁹

However, it is important to note that PISA results also show that students who report reading fiction for their own enjoyment regularly are more proficient readers than students who do not read fiction, or who reported reading fiction only occasionally.²⁰

Time to address the joy of reading

While the increase in Ontario’s students’ reading scores is to be applauded, the decrease in their love of reading is worrying. It is possible that our focus on targets for test scores and on the “mechanics” of literacy have had an impact on students’ attitudes.

Regardless of form, reading for the joy of it, for its capacity to broaden our horizons, use our imaginations, think creatively, understand ourselves and others better, and feel engaged as citizens in the world – reading for all those reasons must be a vital component of what we encourage in our schools.

Notes

- ¹ Education Quality and Accountability Office. (2011). EQAO Assessment of reading, writing and mathematics, Primary division (Grades 1-3), 2010/11. Toronto, ON: Author, p.1.
- ² The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) has asked every student in grade 3 and grade 6, every year since 1998/99, whether they “like to read.” Students have the option of answering “yes,” “sometimes” or “no.” In 2010/11, the wording of the question was slightly changed to give students the option of answering “most of the time,” “sometimes” or “never.” EQAO has treated these results as comparable with data from previous years. See the 2010/11 Provincial Report, note 1, p.10. The data in this report is available online from EQAO in either the provincial reports (1998/99 – 2003/04) or the student questionnaires (published separately from 2004/05-2010/11). See www.eqao.com.
- ³ See e.g., Bussiere, P., F. Cartwright, et al. (2001). Measuring up: The performance of Canada’s youth in reading, mathematics, and science. Ottawa, Statistics Canada: Cat. no. 81-590-XPE, p. 28.
- ⁴ See e.g., Guthrie, J. T. & Wigfield, A. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. In M. Kamil, P.D. Pearson, & R.Barr (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research: Vol. III* (pp. 403-424). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; Booth, D. (2006). *Reading doesn’t matter anymore? Shattering the myths of literacy*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Books.
- ⁵ Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). (2009). *Learning to learn: Student engagement, strategies and practices* (Volume III). Paris, France: OECD.
- ⁶ See note 5, p.30.
- ⁷ See note 4.
- ⁸ Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat. (2007). Learning blocks for achievement. Toronto, Government of Ontario.
- ⁹ PISA, see note 5, p.29.
- ¹⁰ See e.g. note 3, 28.
- ¹¹ People for Education and the Ontario Library Association. (2006). School libraries and student achievement. Toronto: Authors. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/School-Libraries-2006.pdf>.
- ¹² People for Education. (2011). The measure of success: The annual report on Ontario’s publicly funded schools. Toronto: Author.
- ¹³ Snow, C. E., S. Burns, & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- ¹⁴ See e.g., *ibid.*, or People for Education (2011). Doing what matters most: How parents can help their children succeed in school. Toronto: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.peopleforeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/People-for-Education-Doing-What-Matters-Most-how-parents-can-help-their-children-succeed-at-school-20111.pdf>
- ¹⁵ August, D. & Hakuta, K. (Eds.). (1997). *Improving schooling for language-minority children: A research agenda*. Washington, D.C., National Academy Press.
- ¹⁶ RAND Reading Study Group. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Santa Monica CA: Author; Snow, Burns & Griffin, *supra* note 13.
- ¹⁷ EQAO Student questionnaire, 2010/11, retrieved from <http://www.eqao.com/results/results.aspx?grade=36&year=2010&Lang=E&submit=View+Results>
- ¹⁸ Mills, K.A. (2010), “A Review of the ‘Digital Turn’ in New Literacy Studies”, *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 80, pp. 246-271.
- ¹⁹ PISA, see note 6, at p.39.
- ²⁰ PISA, see note 6, at p.35.