

IF YOU CAN READ THIS ...

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Just before Thanksgiving, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) released its 47th Research Report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence*. The report assembled and analyzed data from a wide variety of sources (government collations, academic research, foundation-supported studies, and business surveys). Despite the diversity and range of the data sources, the conclusions are remarkably uniform, even unanimous.

As NEA chairperson Dana Gioia says, in the preface, "The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming.... There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. These...declines have demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications."

The story that the report tells is descriptive, not causal. The authors do not attempt to jump from the disturbing correlations that the report lays out in excruciating detail to any conjectures about what has caused this distressing phenomenon.

The phenomenon is genuine. Those of us who are both teachers and voracious readers have been aware of this for some time. So too have those of us who are both parents and voracious readers. I have added "and voracious readers" deliberately, because when we consider that less than one-third of adult Americans read daily for enjoyment, we need to realize that among the majority of non-habitual readers are many (perhaps most) teachers and parents.

This is not new news. It is not even elitist news that is just now finding its way into popular dissemination. Almost two decades ago, *Newsweek* published a special education issue (Sept. 1990) in which similar statistics were reported. When one of my students, knowing my concerns about American education, called my attention to that issue, I altered the schedule of my world culture and literature classes to include a side-unit devoted to a study and discussion of it and the issues that it raised. The students initially were pleased by the extracurricular diversion, then were appalled when they realized what it said about their education. Since then, the situation has worsened.

Paradoxically, before we had compulsory universal education, we were very much a nation of readers with a much higher level of what E.D. Hirsch calls cultural literacy. One can see this vividly in our nineteenth century literature. For example, in Bret Harte's story "The Outcasts of Poker Flats" (1869), when the party of ousted societal pariahs found themselves stranded by a snowstorm, one of them, Tom "The Innocent" Simson, a young man eloping with his 15-year-old fiancée, helps them to pass the time by telling them the story of "Ash-heels" (as he pronounced "Achilles") that he had read in a copy of Pope's translation of the *Iliad* that he had found. The story, as he tells it, is a comically botched version of the original. However, a typical American youngster with no more than a 5th-grade education today could not even identify the *Iliad*, let alone tell a credible (if flawed) paraphrase of its story.

This contemporary deficiency would not be true elsewhere in the world, even now. In my ancient history class, I once had a student who had come from Russia. When we came to discuss the *Iliad*, I asked the students—in an elite private school—who knew anything about Homer. The Russian student alone raised her hand. When I asked her how she had come to know, she said that in Russia, she had been required to read the *Iliad* in her 4th-grade class.

It is no wonder that we are falling further behind other industrialized nations (and some non-industrialized nations) with each year that we maintain our current education system.

In addition, whenever our practices are adopted by other nations, their systems decline. The most glaring example of this is England, whose schools are still superior to ours, but inferior to what they were before the current generation's exposure to American educational thinking.

Thinkers like Rudolf Flesch and Bruno Bettelheim—early (1950s and 1960s) diagnosticians of the non-reading disease that we have allowed to infect us—have been ignored by us to our detriment.

We still cling to the bourgeois-generated, destructive teachings of developmental psychology, in particular the false notion of age-appropriateness in reading. This has led to a generation taught to read with books so empty of interest and challenge that we cannot be shocked that students leave elementary school with the feeling that reading is worth little or nothing.

Even a promising aberration like the enthusiasm of youngsters for the Harry Potter novels has not led to habits of lifelong reading among its fans (let alone to conversion to pagan witchcraft, which would have been a small price to pay for a re-awakened love of reading).

Reading is the touchstone for all education. Unless we can find the courage to re-introduce substantive and challenging literature into our elementary schools, we will continue to decline.

As Dana Gioia says, "It is no longer reasonable to debate whether the problem exists. It is now time to become more committed to solving it or face the consequences. The nation needs to focus more attention and resources on an activity both fundamental and irreplaceable for democracy."

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