

Literary self-awareness for
lifelong reading in young adults

Barbara J.H. Healy

Mount Saint Vincent University

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband John and to our unborn son. John, without your unfailing support, your academic ear and exceptional mathematical mind, as well as an unforeseen move to Halifax, I never would have chosen to write a thesis. And my son, without your pending arrival to prompt me, I may well never have finished it. I love you both beyond imagining.

Abstract

A reading interest survey focusing on habits, interests and opinions was administered to 225 children in grades four to eight. All children were students at an affluent elementary school in Kanata, Ontario, a suburb of Ottawa. This study differs from similar work in the field in that its subjects are Canadian children and the emphasis of the survey is on students' personal opinions, expressed in an open-ended questioning format rather than closed or scaled questions. Students were asked several open-ended questions regarding their opinions about books they read for pleasure in order to evaluate their literary self-awareness.

It was found that many students were able to express their ideas about books effectively. In doing so, students expressed that the books they disliked most were required reading for school. These findings indicate a need for teachers to investigate their students' opinions in order to provide more compelling reading materials in their classrooms and promote lifelong reading. It was also found that, though a majority of students surveyed considered themselves to be readers, many of the self-identified nonreaders were not as reluctant as they first appeared. Most nonreaders were not adverse to the idea of reading for pleasure, but expressed an inability to find what they considered "good" books. This indicates an important opportunity for the educational community to help these students build positive reading experiences by showing them how to find consistently good reading material.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I have always been an avid reader, even from my first Dr. Seuss book. From my earliest memory, books have consistently been one of my greatest pleasures in life. People who didn't read were a mystery to me—I couldn't help but wonder how they could resist the compelling draw of great characters and a wonderful story. This question has followed me through my teaching career, and I have often wondered how to succeed in convincing a reluctant child to enjoy a book—any book. One day, while running an errand, I witnessed the impact of a compelling book on one young reluctant reader.

While standing in a checkout line, I overheard a gleeful mother talking enthusiastically with the store clerk about her son's reading. The child looked to be about 12 years old, and had his nose firmly planted in a book entitled *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. While the clerk scanned books 2, 3, and 4 of the series, the parent explained breathlessly that she had spent most of her son's life trying to convince him to read and now, finally, she could hardly convince him to put this book down. It was evident that this book was keeping the young man's interest where others had failed to do so. I envied the child's concentration and evident enjoyment, and I started to wonder what it was about this book that was so special. What convinced a boy who once showed little or no interest in books to read so voraciously? Somehow, after a lifetime of tepid interest in reading, this child had discovered a book that inflamed his interest. Now that he had found a book

to love, would he be able to repeat the experience? I wondered if there was a way to turn this single experience into a lifetime of voracious reading. I have often thought about that young man in the checkout line. I wonder if he ever learned to choose the right books for himself, or if he was still limited to the Harry Potter series. Though there are several more of them now, seven books seem like a small selection for a lifetime of reading enjoyment.

Recently, I had the opportunity to meet and work with other reluctant readers in my capacity as a bookseller. I spent my time helping young readers find books that they would love by talking with them about their other interests and encouraging them to share other books they'd enjoyed. I often helped them talk about the things they enjoyed reading, and tried to recommend books that might replicate the experience. It was always encouraging for me to see a familiar face come into the store, asking for more recommendations. I always took the opportunity to ask these young people what they enjoyed about the books they'd read, in the hopes of helping them to make their own good reading choices more consistently. I derived a great deal of personal satisfaction every time I matched a reluctant child with a book he or she loved.

In that time, I learned a great deal about current young adult titles, genres and popular books. It made me wonder how I could use this knowledge to help other children make reading choices that would promote a lifelong joy of reading. Since I felt my life was so much richer for the books that I read, it made me want to share the joy of reading for pleasure with as many people as possible. Rather than force students to read the books I

thought were good, I wanted to explore how to teach children like the young man in the checkout line how to select books for themselves that they would consistently love.

However, before taking on this task, I felt I needed to understand how children choose their personal reading material, and what features and characteristics of books attract them. I was also interested in the books, titles and ideas that turn them away from personal reading. This research was designed with these questions in mind.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Several major studies have been done to investigate children's reading interests in countries such as Australia and the UK. Hall and Coles (1999), Manuel and Robinson (2002) and Hooper (2005) all conducted surveys outside of Canada to inquire about what children were reading. In these studies, personal reading habits were investigated and children were asked to assess the time and emphasis they place on reading outside of school. Studies have also shown that children are able to articulate their ideas about books and their own reading interests. Finally this section will report on the available research relating to children's choices themselves. There is a body of research which seeks to analyze and anticipate the types and features of reading material which interest children.

Personal Reading:

Guthrie (1993) suggests that "... nearly everybody agrees that literacy is learned at home, in reading class, in social studies and in free time" (p. 4). With personal reading having such an impact on lifelong literacy initiatives, teachers, librarians and parents have long wondered how to engage young adults in reading for pleasure, and many studies have been conducted to answer this fundamental question. Most recently, Hooper (2005) surveyed the reading habits of 700 British youths between the ages of eleven and fifteen. She limited her questions to an analysis of students' reading choices

within the testing week, and also investigated students' views on their own reading abilities. Manuel and Robinson (2002) administered a similar survey to 69 Australian youths between the ages of twelve and fifteen. They sought to identify the impact of choice on the students' enjoyment, as well as the role reading plays in students' extra-curricular lives, compared with other activities. Hall and Coles (1999) administered a nation-wide survey to 8,000 youths across England, asking students about what they read during a four-week period, the amount of time they tended to spend reading, and other pertinent questions. Whitehead, et. al. (1977) and Jenkinson (1940) also administered similar surveys to youths of their generations. Although all these studies sought information about titles youths chose to read, there is very little emphasis on why they enjoyed or disliked these books. Isaacs (1990) analyzed the trends she found in the choices of reading material made by students at her school but, once again, these trends were observed through adult analysis. Youths were often asked what they chose to read (Hooper, 2005; Manuel and Robinson, 2002; Tucillo, 2004; Hall and Coles, 1999), but they were rarely asked why they chose to read. This is a key question in developing good reading opportunities for youths.

Literary Self-Awareness:

In order to justify asking youths directly about their reasons for choosing to read, it is first necessary to ask whether they are able to articulate meaningful answers. Several studies of young people's responses suggest youths are very capable of thoughtful self-expression about their

reading. Sarland (1991, in Hooper, 2005) observed that "... young people can be remarkably perceptive about the texts that they enjoy" (p. 114). Isaacs (1990) quoted some particularly articulate students from her middle school who made comments about their reading which suggest more than surface analysis. One sixth-grader showed evidence of his knowledge of his own reading abilities and a willingness to learn from making a poor choice: "this was an interesting book, but very complicated and maybe was too advanced for me...I know to be more careful at picking books instead of just picking anything" (p. 36). Another student made this observation about the complexity of a book she read: "I would only recommend it if you don't really want to think while you read" (p. 36). It seems clear that students are capable of articulating their reasons for both choosing and enjoying a book if given the opportunity. This firsthand information could be vital to helping students find engaging reading that speaks to them.

Reading Choices:

Though important, helping students find engaging reading material is only one step in the process of developing lifelong readers. In order for students to continue reading once they leave school, they must learn to find the "right" books for themselves. According to Guthrie (1993), active, engaged readers choose books that satisfy their interests, may choose to read for aesthetic reasons and are able to make critical judgments about books and authors. Youths who can find books that will suit their interests or needs and who are able to identify those books that do not, are well-

equipped to continue their reading journey without the assistance offered by adults. If we can offer them that independence, by helping them to articulate their opinions and offering them suggestions that are in line with their own (and their peers') opinions, we are well on our way to developing lifelong readers.

In an effort to encourage students' interest in reading, teachers often ask students to read classic, adult fiction with the hopes of exposing them to "great literature". Although there is certainly a place for classic literature in the classroom, reluctant readers cannot hope to develop a connection to characters and situations that do not seem to reflect anything about their own lives. Young adulthood is a difficult time of life—children are dealing with many changes in their lives, and are often looking for role models, and new ways of dealing with their increasingly complicated worlds. Literature began addressing these needs with the publication of S.E. Hinton's now classic novel, *The Outsiders*. Since then, YA fiction has grown into a genre in itself, gaining mass appeal with youths and teens. According to Carrol (1997),

young adult books frequently show young teens that they are not the only ones who experience problems and even turmoil when dealing with their new bodies and sexuality, with changing relationships with parents and friends, with more philosophically advanced ways of thinking about themselves, their world and their place in it. (p. 25)

These themes suit many of the developmental tasks suggested by Carlsen (1980) in his seminal work, *Books and the teenage reader*. Some of these tasks include developing independence from parents, coming to terms with one's sexuality and achieving a personal set of values.

There are other common characteristics of youth which may impact the kind of reading they enjoy. Tucker (1999, p. 227) suggests that “young readers like to share the imaginary experience of feeling exclusively different from others”. This may account for the popularity of fantasy novels, where the protagonist is often endowed with special abilities. According to Erikson (1974, in Hooper, 2005), children in this stage of development tend to experiment with role-playing to help them find their own identities. Hooper (2005) suggests that “reading choices can provide opportunities [for youths] to engage with different roles at an imaginative level” (p.114). This sense of escapism is also cited as an important element of their writing by both Tamora Pierce (1993) and Gary Blackwood (1989), two prominent YA authors. Blackwood (1989) writes with his childhood self in mind, suggesting that he had no interest in the mundane aspects of “real life”—he preferred to read about “situations in which [he] was extremely unlikely to ever find [himself]” (p. 49). Tamora Pierce (1993) claims that her readers are empowered by teens that have more control over their surroundings than today’s youth have over their own lives.

Fantasy and its element of escapism is not the only genre that seems to find favour with today’s youth. Trends suggest that *Coming of Age* fiction is also popular (Chance, 1999; Hooper, 2005; Isaacs, 1990; White, 2000). *Coming of Age* fiction portrays young protagonists facing problems and situations that are likely to emerge for today’s youth, and “there is a growing tendency to define teenage fiction as addressing the personal concerns of adolescents through themes such as prejudice, bullying, racism, lives of

refugees, sex and appearance" (Hooper, 2005, p. 116). Chance (1999) suggests that "readers [in her study] were searching for characters whom they can relate to or recognize as they identified their favourite books" (p. 66). YA Coming of Age fiction taps into the lives of its readers, allowing them to see their own potential problems dealt with in several different ways. This concurs with Herz and Gallo's (1996, in White, 2000) criteria for literature that "reflects the students' universe". Among other elements, they suggest that the central protagonist be a teenager who's "...actions and decisions are major factors in the plot's outcome", and that the point of view "...reflect an adolescent's interpretation of events and people" (p. 52).

Working under the assumption that "book choices young people make reflect their preferences and interests in reading topics, genres and literary characteristics" (p. 65), Chance (1999) analyzed literary elements of the top 23 young adult novel choices for 1997. Although she did not have a baseline of comparison, some interesting trends emerged. Chance (1999) found that 70% of the books she analyzed were narrated from the first person point of view, and 100% of the protagonists were realistic, 3-dimensional characters, most of whom underwent some kind of significant change over the course of the novel. This correlates with what we have learned about young adults—they are going through tremendous changes, and tend to seek out characters and situations which reflect their own lives. The high proportion of narratives told in the more intimate first person point of view may also make it easier for youths to relate to the characters. Chance (1999) also found that 74% of

the books she analyzed dealt with serious topics, which may be reflective of readers' interest in the problems facing modern youth.

Manuel and Robinson (2002) also found some interesting trends in their study. They found that boys were more likely to read their favourite books more than once, while girls in their study rarely did so. A surprising 43% of students finished the worst book they ever read. This could indicate that only half the students felt able to dismiss a book that did not engage their interest. These results seem less surprising, given the fact that some students indicated that the book was required reading for school. Manuel and Robinson (2002) found other interesting gender-related results. 31% of girls tested indicated that their favourite books had been recommended by teachers, compared with only 11% of boys. Clearly, teachers play a greater role in helping girls find suitable reading. Both sexes were most influenced by family, friends or the media in determining which books to read.

In fact, the media seems to play a significant role in many students' reading choices. Manuel and Robinson (2002) found that the Harry Potter series and *Lord of the Rings* topped their list of students' favourite books. Both had recently been made into movies at the time of the study. Hooper (2005) found similar results. Benton (1995) and Isaacs (1990) noticed similar media influences in the reading choices their students made.

"Young readers are responsive to the world they inhabit. Adolescents choose books that their peers have enjoyed, and which validate reading as a peer cultural experience" (Hooper, 2005, p. 118). Other studies corroborate the notion that children often choose books based on recommendations from

their peers (Isaacs, 1990; Hall and Coles, 1999; Manuel and Robinson, 2002). It is not surprising that peers have such a strong influence on what students read. This is yet another reason to help students articulate their ideas about books more clearly. Students who have strong abilities to articulate their positive and negative ideas about books are better able to share these ideas with their peers and help others on the road to independent reading.

Genre is another factor that tends to influence the reading choices youths make. Benton (1995) found that, although students do not seem to limit themselves to one particular genre of literature, there are several literary genres that appear more often than others. Benton noticed horror, comic fiction, realistic fiction, science-fiction and fantasy titles appeared more frequently than other genres. He also noted, however, that students did not seem to limit their reading to a single genre. Conversely, Hooper (2005) observed that students showed a certain loyalty towards the fantasy genre, noting that those who read fantasy novels typically included multiple authors of the genre on their reading lists.

There also seems to be some diversity in the complexity of reading materials chosen by students. "Middle school readers represent an enormous range. Some are still children in their emotions, skills interest and intellect. Others almost deserve the title of 'young adults' " (Isaacs, 1990, p. 35). Isaacs observed that students choices range from "books often read by elementary students" (p. 35) to adult fantasy titles. It is also interesting to note that, although fantasy is popular with both sexes, adult titles such as

Lord of the Rings, appear much more often on boys' lists (Isaacs, 1990; Hooper, 2005). Isaacs (1990) also offers the observation that, although simple series books do appear on reading lists, they are often criticized by the students themselves, indicating a willing move towards more complex literature among middle school students.

Teacher Awareness of Student Reading:

Youths who know how to find books they enjoy are more likely to read on their own. This paves the way for them to become independent, lifelong readers; something most teachers hope to see their students achieve. "Teachers' awareness of the preferred learning and reading styles of students will go some way towards optimizing the reading experience for all students" (Manuel and Robinson, 2002, p. 78). It is important for teachers to develop an awareness of what current teens like to read and why, in order to develop such awareness. Current classroom initiatives to incorporate interest and motivation into their reading programs (Guthrie, 1993) will strongly benefit from research into these questions.

Research suggests that required texts in many classrooms differ strongly from the types of books students enjoy reading on their own. This is particularly true of boys (Hooper, 2005; Manuel and Robinson, 2002; White, 2000), who rarely cite teacher- recommended or classroom texts as books they enjoyed reading. Although no one would suggest that teachers should simply cater to students interests while assigning reading material, it would be beneficial for them to know what students enjoy reading, in order to

inform their suggestions, and help lead students towards independent reading. There is a difference, after all, between classic texts for instructional purposes, and books to encourage readers' enjoyment. Although they are certainly not exclusive categories—classic literature can be enjoyed, while young adult fiction can be studied—teachers' practice and the reading material selected in class have a powerful effect on adolescents' reading experiences (Manuel and Robinson, 2002). White (2000) makes an interesting observation about teaching literature to students who are not yet fluent readers:

Insisting that they read adult literature is the same thing as insisting that an elementary student read research articles. In order to make reading literacy attainable for these students, we must find a way for them to connect their world with the written word—a key that unlocks the door to reading (p. 52).

Teachers who are armed with an understanding of their students' reading interests will have an easier time motivating them to read. Although an introduction to classic literature is an important element of a child's education, it is not necessarily this introduction that will pave the way for students to develop a love for reading. Children who have made a personal connection to their reading material are more likely to continue reading than those who were unable to do so.

If we as teachers are to be advocates for lifelong reading in our students, it is important for us to be aware of, and to utilize the reading interests of our students. Studies have shown that students are able to articulate their opinions about books effectively, and this is an untapped resource for teachers to draw from. Who better to know what students like to

read than the students themselves? Engaging our students effectively in reading and showing them how to select materials for themselves could mean the difference between sending readers or nonreaders from our classrooms.

Chapter 3

Methodology

General Research Perspective:

In this study, I sought to investigate students' ability to choose books for themselves and their knowledge of their own reading interests. As a teacher-researcher, I was interested in the results from both a practical and an academic perspective. As a teacher, I felt that open-ended, anecdotal responses from students would offer the best practical insights about the topic of interest; while, as a researcher, it was important to obtain impartial, empirical evidence to support my observations. As such, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected using a survey, as described below.

Steps were taken to minimize researcher bias, including the development of clear rubrics for assessing student responses. Also, coding categories were taken from previously established studies wherever possible (Hall and Coles, 1999).

Participants:

The youths participating in this study were 224 students in grades 4-8 at a public elementary school in Ottawa, Ontario. (See **Table 1** for further breakdown of demographic data.) It is a middle-class, English track school, located in a fairly affluent suburb of Ottawa. Students are mostly second or third-generation Canadian, with some first-generation Canadians hailing from

Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. 49.5% of respondents spoke a language other than English at home, with 52.3% of these being Asian languages. 76.9% of all respondents identified themselves as readers, while only 19.5% of students identified themselves as nonreaders. 57% of respondents were males, 43% were females. Finally, 37% of students were in Junior grades (4,5,6) and 63% of students were in grades 7 and 8. These key demographic groups were significant in the analysis of survey results.

Table 1: Breakdown of Participating Students

Grade	Males	Females	Total
4	8	6	14
5	16	13	29
6	22	17	39
7	35	39	74
8	47	21	68
Total Students	128	96	224

I chose this school because I had personal and professional knowledge of the staff, students and principal. This knowledge allowed me to obtain results more effectively and efficiently than I could have in another school environment. As well, this school is actively committed to their literacy improvement plan, and my research will help them to achieve their literacy goals. This project coincides with a school-wide literacy initiative, and as such this research was included in the school's literacy improvement plan for this

academic year. Results were shared with the school community at their request.

Teaching staff at the school administered the survey as a regular classroom activity. Although all students completed the survey, only students who provided written parental consent participated in this research. Students received a letter explaining the study (*Appendix 3*), along with a form outlining informed consent (*Appendix 4*), as outlined by the University Research Ethics Board (UREB).

Due to the narrow demographic of a single school, it is not possible to apply these results to other schools, students or situations. It is hoped, however, that the results found in this study will act as a starting point for other educators and researchers to gain insight into the reading interests of children in this age group.

Ethical Considerations:

There were minimal risks involved in the implementation of this study. I am a contracted teacher with the local school board and a former teacher at this school. I am well known by most staff, and some students. In keeping with school district policy, written consent to conduct this research was obtained from the school principal. All of my interactions with participants were conducted on school property, with the principal's knowledge and consent. This research follows the ethical guidelines put forward by the UREB of Mount Saint Vincent University. Participants' guardians provided informed consent before any research activities occurred, and all consent forms were

developed and approved according to UREB guidelines. Participants' names are kept strictly confidential. Students' names, as well as any other identifying information, do not appear in the final analysis of results.

Procedure & Data Collection:

In order to investigate students' reading interests, I compiled a survey questionnaire (*Appendix 1*) that touches on several key elements, and asks students in grades four to eight to identify what they like or dislike about what they read. Language Arts teachers of the targeted grades agreed to administer the survey to their students as a regular classroom activity, and provided me with the completed questionnaires of students with the accompanying signed consent form. Since I did not administer the survey myself, I also distributed an instruction sheet (see *Appendix 2*) to teachers in order to maintain consistency of administration.

Instrument:

I designed a written survey to collect data about children's reading choices and their opinions about reading. Some questions were replicated or adapted from other studies while others were developed to fulfill a need in the research. For the purposes of this study, the term youth is used to identify pre-teen and early adolescent children, between the ages of 10 and 14. In this research, a reader is defined based on youths' interest in reading, not necessarily on their abilities, while a nonreader is someone with little or

no interest in reading for pleasure. Students were asked to identify themselves as readers or nonreaders based on the definitions stated in the survey administration guidelines given to their teachers (*Appendix 2*).

Table 2 outlines a division and analysis of survey questions, including their sources and relevance. See *Appendix 1* for the original survey questionnaire.

Table 2: Analysis of Survey Questions

Survey Questions	Source	Rationale for Asking
1-5	Adapted from Hall & Coles, 1999	Asked to identify students of ESL. This is to identify potential differences in their answers from those of their native English-speaking peers.
6-8	Created by the researcher	Geared towards identifying students' self-concepts as readers, and whether these opinions have changed.
9	Hall & Coles, 1999	Anecdotal response to determine students' attitudes about reading
10-11	Adapted from Hall & Coles, 1999	Seek to identify books which students have read recently, indicating popularity and prevalence of particular titles
12	Created by the researcher	Another question of self-analysis, these answers will be compared with those in questions 6-9 to help identify discrepancies in self-identification.
13-16	15 and 15b) were adapted from Hall & Coles, 1999. Others were created by the researcher.	Questions relating to students opinions about their reading. They seek students' self-articulated opinions about books. These questions were assessed according to students' literary self-awareness to determine how effectively students can express their opinions about what they read.

17	Created by the researcher	Question identifies outside influences which impact students' reading choices.
18-19	Adapted from Hall & Coles, 1999	Seek to identify the prevalence of books in students' lives outside of school
20-24	Created by the researcher	Seek to establish students' regular reading habits, outside of school.
25-26	Adapted from Hall & Coles, 1999	Seek to establish reading patterns among media and genre

Although studies have shown that many students who do not enjoy reading novels still spend time reading other materials, such as magazines and web pages (Hall & Coles, 1999; Manuel & Robinson, 2002; Hooper, 2005), it should be noted that there is little emphasis on these media in this survey. This is because I hope to identify elements and styles specific to YA fiction that attract young readers, with the hope of assisting teachers and librarians in their attempts to find great books for young readers. Magazines and web pages, though highly relevant reading material, lie beyond the scope of this study.

Also, due to time constraints, it was not possible to conduct a full pilot study to test the survey instrument. However, as most questions were derived from another, longer-term study (Hall and Coles, 1999) with some modifications and adaptations to make them more applicable to the current research, it was felt that a pilot study was not necessary to test the instrument.

Handling Data:

To preserve consistency of analysis, all data was handled and cleaned by the researcher. A unique identifier was created for each respondent, with students' grade, homeroom and gender embedded in the number. This allowed for easy retrieval of original documents as needed. Data was entered into a prepared spreadsheet, with all quantitative questions clustered together and anecdotal responses entered and coded separately.

Quantitative data is defined as any question that has a finite number of responses, while anecdotal or free-form data allows students to respond in multiple ways. Each type of data was handled differently in this study.

Quantitative Data:

Quantitative data was entered into a spreadsheet according to preset categories taken directly from the survey questionnaire. Unanswered questions were coded as NA, and ambiguous or contradictory answers were left as written for the purposes of consistency (i.e. students who considered themselves to be both reader and nonreader were coded as "yes" in both categories.) Using the statistical program R, frequency distributions were calculated for each applicable survey question. In addition, some questions were correlated with others to identify whether responses varied significantly based on other independent variables. Quantitative data was compared against 4 basic categories of demographic data:

1. Male / Female

2. Junior / Intermediate
3. Reader / Nonreader
4. ESL / Native English at home

For the purposes of this study, the identifier of *Junior* refers to students in grades 4, 5 or 6, while *Intermediate* refers to respondents in grades 7 or 8. The classification of *Reader* and *Nonreader* are dependent on students' self-identification, based on the criteria explained by their teachers at the time of data collection (*Appendix 2*). The identifier of ESL (English as a Second Language) is given to any student who responded positively to the question "Do you speak a language other than English at home?" As such, this was not a formal assessment of students' English abilities, only an identifier of students' self-identified language habits at home.

Qualitative Data:

Students' open-ended responses were entered as written, with some spelling errors corrected for the purposes of legibility. Whenever answers were ambiguous or difficult to interpret, they were transcribed exactly as written. Responses were then coded according to content, overall attitude towards reading and literary self-awareness, where applicable.

Content coding categories were determined based on the range of student responses, and created to fill a need. For example, comments relating to books were coded by aspects of the book (i.e. pacing, book length, humour, informative) as well as literary elements (i.e. plot, setting, character, genre). Any outlying responses were coded as "other". See

Appendix F (Coding Categories and Criteria) for a complete list of content coding criteria for all free-form questions.

Overall attitude towards reading was determined based on student responses to questions 8, 9 and 27. Responses were given a score of 0 for negative words associated with reading, such as "boring", "not interesting", "hate", "waste of time." Scores of 1 were given to neutral comments, which placed no value on reading for its own sake. Neutral comments typically referred to reading as "important in life and school"; "informational"; "a way to pass time." Responses were given a score of 2 if positive wording was used to describe reading. Some examples are "cool"; "fun"; "exciting."

This study sought to investigate the features of books that children enjoy reading for pleasure. An important aspect of this investigation is the respondents' ability to identify their own reading interests and the features of books which affect these interests. As such, the term *literary self-awareness* refers to students' ability to express their ideas about what they read. Questions requiring students to explain why they liked or disliked a book were given a literary self-awareness score based on the following rubric, which was established by the researcher (*Table 3*).

Table 3: Literary Self-Awareness Score Rubric

Level	Description	Example
1	Basic judgment about the book	Fun, cool, boring, interesting
2	Rudimentary use of book language, or literary elements	I liked the characters, story, plot, setting.
3	Use of book language and/or specific content from book to support opinion	I liked the characters because they are funny. It is a magic story, so most of the characters can do magic
4	Clear reason (may include book language) or connections to the text which would allow student to replicate the reading experience	the paths of different characters intertwine as they all progress to their goals I like mysteries and how they're going to solve it

It should be noted that literary self-awareness is not dependent on eloquence or vocabulary. This score is based predominantly on the content of responses, as well as the likelihood of a student identifying the same criteria in another book. For example, although the comment "it was interesting and I like mysteries" is not a particularly eloquent statement, the student has identified that part of the reason she liked this book is its genre. Knowing this, she is more likely to seek out other mysteries to further her reading, as she is confident that she "likes mysteries". For this reason, this comment received a level 4 for literary self-awareness.

The researcher used her own knowledge of YA fiction to identify authors and genres of book titles whenever possible. When there was not enough information given by respondents to identify a book conclusively, authors and genres were left blank.

Chapter 4

Analysis & Results

General Analysis:

Survey results were analyzed through comparisons of responses from different demographic groups. Comparisons were made according to gender, age (as determined by grade divisions), self-identification as readers or nonreaders and English and non-English spoken at home. Since there were very few instances where an apparent difference was observed among English and Non-English students, data within these demographic divisions is rarely mentioned in analysis. This phenomenon is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Numbers of respondents in the four demographic categories sometimes differed dramatically. As such, comparisons were made by proportion of respondents instead of by pure numbers. It is hoped that this method will normalize results to make comparisons more reasonable. *Table 4* shows both the exact number and the percentage of total respondents in each demographic category.

Table 4: Demographic Categories and Respondents

(Total Respondents= 224)

Category	Number of Respondents	% of total Respondents

Girls	96	43%
Boys	128	57%
Readers	172	77%
Nonreaders	44	20%
Junior	82	37%
Intermediate	142	63%
Other Language at Home	110	49%
Native English	114	51%

It should be noted that the Reader / Nonreader category does not encompass 100% of respondents, as the other groupings do. This is perhaps because some students did not consider them mutually exclusive categories. 12 students did not consider themselves readers or nonreaders, and chose not to identify themselves in either category, while 4 students actively put themselves into both. Some reasons for this may be that students are ambiguous about their own reading abilities, students consider themselves proficient at reading, yet rarely do it for pleasure, or perhaps some students simply chose not to answer the question.

Since this research uses students' self-identification as readers and nonreaders as the basis for many of the analyses seen here, it is necessary to identify who comprises these important demographic groups. See *Table 5*. Note that nonreaders are more often boys than girls, and that Intermediate students are more likely to be nonreaders than their Junior level counterparts.

Table 5: Readers and Nonreaders by Demographic Categories

Category	% of Readers	% of Nonreaders
Girls (96)	87	13
Boys (128)	69	25
Junior (82)	83	17
Intermediate (142)	73	21

Self-concept as a Reader:

One of the most important factors governing a child's reading habits outside of school is their perception of themselves as a reader. Children who find success in reading early in their academic careers are more likely to read for pleasure than those who struggle with reading in school (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). For this reason, several survey questions sought to determine respondents' opinions of themselves as readers.

The first of these questions (Question 12) asked students to rate their abilities as a reader. Responses ranged from "I am a very bad reader" to "I am an excellent reader." Since 77% of all respondents consider themselves to be readers, it was expected that most students would have positive perceptions of their reading abilities. This was generally proven true, as 65% of all respondents claimed to be either very good or excellent readers. In fact, fewer than 10% of all students placed themselves in the 3 lowest ranking categories of reader, even when they considered themselves to be

nonreaders. This research could indicate that there are nonreaders out there who simply have not yet been properly introduced to the joys of reading for pleasure. Perhaps they have not yet found the right book, or they have not yet made a connection to reading. Whatever the reason, it seems clear that these “nonreaders” are not yet completely closed to the opportunities that reading for pleasure can provide.

In question 9, students were asked to complete the sentence “Reading is...” in order to determine their overall perceptions about reading. Comments were scored on a scale of 0-2, with 0 being negative, 1 neutral and 2 positive. Final comments made at the end of the survey usually fell into one of these 3 categories, so these were incorporated into students’ perceptions of reading scores whenever appropriate. Comments were scored according to keywords used by the student. *Table 6* shows examples of these for each category. The most common keyword in the negative category was boring, while the neutral category comprised mostly of comments relating to the educational benefits of reading. The positive category encompassed a wide range of responses.

Table 6: Keywords for Perceptions of Reading Score

Category / Score	Keywords
Positive (2)	cool, exciting, fun, good, wonderful, great, amazing, awesome, enjoyable, love
Negative (0)	don’t like, hate, dislike, boring, waste of time
Neutral (1)	educational, practical, helps you learn, helpful, important, interesting, passes the time, learning experience

Generally, students had positive things to say about reading, as 40-60% of all respondents scored above neutral. Girls seem to have a more positive perception about reading than boys do, and Junior level students are more enthusiastic about the pastime than their Intermediate counterparts. As expected, the most negative perceptions belong to the nonreaders, as 40% showed clearly negative perceptions about reading, with nearly 50% of nonreaders stating that it was "boring". It is interesting to note that many students made conditional statements about reading. Comments were considered conditional if they included the words "if", "unless" or "as long as". The most common examples of this were "reading is boring unless I have the right book", or "reading is fun as long as I have a good book". *Table 7* shows the breakdown of conditional statements about reading by demographic group. The groups in bold type frequently consider themselves to be nonreaders.

Table 7: Breakdown of Conditional Statements about Reading

Category	% of Conditional statements in Question 9
Reader	15
Nonreader	40
Boys	25
Girls	15
Junior	20
Intermediate	19

These scores, along with students' self-perception of their abilities as readers, begin to paint a clear picture of why these students are not reading outside of school. Many of them do not consider themselves strong readers, so they have likely not experienced much success with academic reading. Given this, it is only natural that so many nonreaders consider reading to be "boring" or "a waste of time", since few of them have likely encountered excellent, level-appropriate reading material. Yet, despite these factors, 40% of nonreaders feel that they could find enjoyment through reading if only they could find the "right book". As teachers, knowing the lifelong benefits of reading for pleasure, helping them find that elusive "right book" should be of primary importance in our classrooms.

Literary Self-awareness:

While analyzing anecdotal responses to questions about reading, it became clear that some students gave more precise responses than others. Some students were able to clearly articulate, with examples, what they liked or disliked about a book, while others gave little more than "it was good" or "it was boring". This phenomenon speaks to the concept of *literary self-awareness*. Students who were able to discuss their reading clearly and precisely were more likely to identify other books that would interest them. For the purposes of this study, *literary self-awareness* is defined as a respondent's ability to use *book language* to discuss reading and features of books. Book language refers to the literary elements that children learn about in school (i.e. plot, characters, setting, writing style, etc). Five

anecdotal responses pertaining to questions about what children liked or disliked about what they read (survey questions 11b, 11c, 14, 15a and 16a) were scored for literary self-awareness using the following rubric (*Table 3*). An average was taken to give each child a single score out of 4. Results were then compared against demographic data. (See *Figure 1* in *Appendix 6* for a detailed comparative graph of these results.)

It should be noted that eloquent, articulate responses are not necessarily indicative of strong literary self-awareness. Although these types of responses often scored highly, the purpose of this analysis was not to judge students' ability to express themselves, but rather to judge their ability to identify features of books they liked. High scores were mainly given to comments that indicated a students' ability to recreate a reading experience by knowing exactly what features they enjoyed about a book.

In general, students were able to use basic book language to talk about their reading. Over 50% of respondents scored a level 2 in literary self-awareness. Children are able to use learned vocabulary about literary elements when talking about books. 32% of students were able to relate specific examples of what they liked, thus scoring level 3. However, a very small percentage of students were able to articulate clear reasons for their choices, or to make connections with their reading in order to score a level 4. This indicates that, while students are familiar with the features of books, they are rarely able to identify specifics that might help them choose another great book in the future. In general, it was found that Intermediate level girls have the strongest literary self-awareness, with 43% of Intermediates and

40% of girls scoring level 3 or higher. If more children were able to clearly identify the features that made them love a book, they would likely be more successful at finding something great to read. Given students' insistence that reading is fun if they can find the right book, it would benefit students and teachers alike to spend more time on book selection in the classroom.

Children's Reading Interests:

Although children are not always clear about the details of what they like to read, some clear trends have, nonetheless, emerged in their responses. Fiction is the clear winner among all groups, with every demographic group (including nonreaders) at 60% or more in favour of fiction. Magazines and comics follow, usually at around 40% for most groups. It is interesting to note that nonreaders and Intermediate students both show a greater preference for magazines than their counterparts. This is perhaps due to the short, colourful articles available in magazines. Intermediate students claim to have less time to read than their Junior counterparts. As such, they would be drawn to short articles which they can read when they have a few spare moments. Nonreaders would also likely be drawn to the short articles, as they are easier than a novel for a struggling reader to finish successfully.

Looking more closely at fiction, the three dominant genres of interest were fantasy (51%), mystery (45%) and realistic fiction (33%). (See *Figure 2* in *Appendix 6* for a detailed comparative graph of these results.) Readers (58%) were much more interested in fantasy than nonreaders (31%). This is

perhaps because of the complicated plots, long chapters and varied characters which tend to be prevalent in fantasy literature. Many current fantasy titles (Lord of the Rings, the Harry Potter Series, His Dark Materials) (See *Appendix 7* for a complete list of cited children's book titles.) are 300 pages long or more, with many characters to keep track of. These features could be quite intimidating for nonreaders. It is also possible that nonreaders typically take a more pragmatic approach to reading. Many nonreaders (34%) scored neutrally on their perceptions of reading, indicating that they perceived reading to be useful and educational, rather than enjoyable and fantastical. In fact, most nonreaders (56%) were interested in mystery fiction above all other genres. There are several possible reasons for this. When young children are learning to read, they are often introduced to simple mysteries (A-Z Mysteries, Magic Tree House, Bailey School Kids) (*Appendix 7*). These books follow a clear formula which students are easily able to predict and follow. Many mysteries follow a similar formula, which can be very comforting to struggling readers. This, combined with the fast-paced plots and few characters which are common in mystery novels, may explain the popularity of mysteries among nonreaders.

Interestingly, when asked about the genre of their all-time favourite book, though fantasy (50%) still emerges as dominant, *Coming of Age* stories (31%) made more of an appearance. (Coming of Age refers to any book that deals with realistic situations faced by teens or children. They may or may not include current teen issues such as drugs or sexuality, but in all cases protagonists experience personal growth.) Not surprisingly,

Intermediate girls are the most likely groups to choose this genre. Girls at the Intermediate level are undergoing a great many personal and physical changes, and as such, they often seek comfort in the experiences of others, and hope to identify with characters going through similar experiences (Carrol, 1997; Carlsen, 1980).

Children were quite opinionated when it came to the books that they read. Although they were not always able to articulate details, many of them were familiar enough with literary elements to express their ideas. Looking at the features of children's all-time favourite books, plot (42%) and characters (41%) emerge as the most important elements to children, followed closely by ideas (30%). (See *Figure 3* in *Appendix 6* for a detailed comparative graph of these results.) Children value many of the same literary elements that adult readers do, with some small, but important, differences. Pacing (wording such as fast-paced, action-packed and exciting) is much more important to nonreaders than to their peers, when choosing a favourite book. Pacing ranks 10% higher among these children than it does in any other grouping. In the few opportunities that these students have had to enjoy a great book, many of them found that books were not "boring" if their plots moved quickly enough. Unfortunately, many of these students are also likely unable to identify books which are paced correctly for them, making it difficult to find other books they might enjoy.

It is interesting to note the variety of responses to the question "what did you like about your all-time favourite book?" There are almost as many answers as there are students, and, in fact, very few patterns emerged from

this data. Children are indeed reading, and they have quite a lot to say about their choices. Some were interested in the writing style of the author, like this boy in grade 5 who said, "I like how the author makes it like you're really in the story". Others cited characters, realism and information as reasons for their choice, as did this young man in grade 7; "it was a real page-turner because it made you sympathize for the characters and it showed me that our society today is so much better than in old times." Finally, one nonreader in grade 8 had this purely pragmatic response to the question: "it started with action and ended in it- that's the kind of book I like; No Boring Parts (especially the beginning)". Clearly, this is a young lady who knows what she likes. Other answers ranged from setting, to genre, to originality, to humour, and responses become more articulate in the upper grades. Many students have ideas about what they like to read and why.

Books Children Like:

These students were willing and able to express themselves about what they like about books. But from a pragmatic perspective, what should we, as teachers be recommending to students? As might be expected, children's preferred book choices are as varied as the children themselves. For the 217 respondents to this question, there are over 150 titles, leaving very few opportunities for repetition. Nonetheless, some trends emerged. In order to present results that are not skewed in favour of series books (such as Harry Potter and Chronicles of Narnia), children's favourites are presented by author instead of title. JK Rowling is the clear favourite among children's authors, garnering top spot among almost all demographic groups. She is followed closely by Louis Sachar, Lemony Snicket, Christopher Paolini and Roald Dahl. *Table 9* shows the top authors in each demographic group. When multiple authors share the same number of respondents, all are listed and weighted equally.

Table 9: Top chosen Authors by Demographic Group

(See *Appendix 7* for a full listing of children's books)

Demographic	Author	Number of Students
Overall 224 respondents	JK Rowling	18
	Louis Sachar	13
	Lemony Snicket	8
	Roald Dahl	7
	Christopher Paolini	7
Readers 172 respondents	JK Rowling	12
	Louis Sachar	8
	Roald Dahl	7
	Christopher Paolini	7

	Lemony Snicket	6
Nonreaders	JK Rowling	4
44 respondents	Louis Sachar	3
	Lemony Snicket	2
	RL Stine	2
Girls	Roald Dahl	6
96 respondents	Lemony Snicket	5
	Louis Sachar	4
	Judy Blume, Ann Brashares, Lisi Harrison, JK Rowling	3
Boys	Darren Shan	2
128 respondents	Colton Simpson	2
	Jonathan Stroud	2
	JRR Tolkien	2
Junior	Louis Sachar	8
82 respondents	Lemony Snicket	6
	Roald Dahl	4
	JK Rowling	4
Intermediate	JK Rowling	14
142 respondents	Louis Sachar	5
	Christopher Paolini	4

It is interesting to note that most of these authors write predominantly in the fantasy genre, which is consistent with students' preferences shown in *Figure 2*. Also, as previously stated, most students cite plot, characters and ideas as their primary reasons for liking a book. Many of these authors portray strong, interesting characters in creative, sometimes elaborate, often fast-paced plots. It is also notable that so many of these top-read authors have been portrayed in the media in recent years. Rowling, Tolkien, Snicket, Paolini and Sachar, all 5 top authors, have had their books made into movies at some point during the last 5 years. Although all good writers, this phenomenon is perhaps more indicative of the influence of media on children than it is a reflection of the books themselves. Also, since children often take recommendations about what to read from their peers, it is possible that

many students at this school talked about or watched movies relating to these books, and chose to read them for that reason.

Books Children Dislike:

Though the results in this case were not unexpected, it is still important for teachers to know and understand what books children enjoy reading. If encouraging a love of reading is our goal, it is perhaps more important that we, as teachers, know which books to avoid. The children surveyed in this study had some clear opinions about this.

Many students (35%) felt that the concept of a book would determine whether they would like it or not. Students who did not enjoy anthropomorphism, for example, were unlikely to enjoy reading Kenneth Oppel's trilogy about the secret world of bats. Likewise, students who disliked the idea of fantasy claimed a Harry Potter title to be one of the worst books they'd ever read. In all demographic groups, concept was a determining factor of students disliking a book.

The next dominant factor was whether or not a book was boring (33%). This speaks to many children's inability to identify specific information about the books they read. 35% of nonreaders were unable to explain what made a book "boring", simply citing the word as a reason to dislike a book. As already discussed, it is likely that these books were too slow-paced for the enjoyment of many of these nonreaders. See *Appendix 6, Figure 4* for more details about what children disliked about their reading.

Considering that book concept is such an important factor in children's enjoyment of a book, it is perhaps not surprising to see the choices they made about books they disliked. While JK Rowling dominated the list of favourite books, she is also quite prevalent among despised literature. Her books depict a clear and unique concept- children go off to boarding school to learn about magic and fight evil- one that is not necessarily enjoyed by all children. JK Rowling is, in fact, the only author that appears on both lists. This speaks perhaps to the prevalence of her series more than anything else, since, in today's schools, it is assumed that most everyone has read a Harry Potter book. Students who would not necessarily be interested in such a concept may feel pressured to read it anyway. It seems there are as many students who dislike Harry Potter as there are those who love him. Kenneth Oppel's trilogy is another example of the power of concept. It is a richly written story about the life of a young bat, told from his own perspective. Although some children loved these books and listed them among their favourites, many others considered them to be some of the worst books they'd read. Their reasons for this regularly stemmed from the concept- students were unwilling to accept the idea of talking bats.

One last thing to note about books which children dislike is of particular importance to teachers. There is a prevalence of texts which were required reading for school on this list. Of all these most hated books, only Harry Potter was not assigned in school. Clearly, these books are not keeping with the plot, characterization and pacing that children love to read. Teachers are assigning rich literature which simply doesn't interest many children. If

our goal as educators is to introduce children to different types of literature, and to expose them to good writing, then perhaps this list is of little consequence. If, however, our goal is to lead children to a lifelong love of reading, then books like *The Egypt Game* and *Shakespeare Stealer* are clearly not going to get us there. In order to foster a love of reading, teachers need to take the reading interests of their children into account. Although they may love the language and accessibility of *The Shakespeare Stealer*, it is evident that many of their students do not feel the same.

Table 10: Worst chosen Books by Demographic Group

(See *Appendix 7* for a full listing of children's books)

Demographic	Books	Number of Students
Overall	Harry Potter Series	14
	Egypt Game	10
	Silverwing Series	10
	Hatchet	7
	Owls in the Family	7
Readers	Harry Potter Series	10
	Egypt Game	7
	Hatchet	7
	Owls in the Family	7
	Silverwing Series	6
Nonreaders	Harry Potter Series	4
	Silverwing Series	3
	Egypt Game	2
	Shakespeare Stealer	2
Girls	Hatchet	6
	Harry Potter Series	5
	Silverwing Series	4
	Tuck Everlasting	4
Boys	Harry Potter Series	9
	Egypt Game	7
	Silverwing Series	6
	Owls in the Family	5
	Shakespeare Stealer	5
Junior	Egypt Game	6

	Harry Potter Series	5
	Owls in the Family	3
Intermediate	Silverwing Series	10
	Harry Potter Series	9
	Hatchet	7
	Shakespeare Stealer	6
	Tuck Everlasting	6

Reading Recommendations:

Although some teacher recommendations are met with disdain, many students take advice from others about what to read. I have had many interesting conversations with friends, colleagues and family about what I've been reading, and what to add to my ever-growing list of what to read next. Although I tend to stick to YA fiction, I have often stumbled across excellent adult reading materials during these conversations. Perhaps more importantly, I always have a book list in my head to fall back on when I'm not sure what to read next. Having this ever-growing list helps me make book selections quickly and effectively. Question 17 on the survey dealt with these kinds of recommendations, and asked students from whom they took suggestions about what to read. (See *Figure 5* in *Appendix 6* for a detailed comparative graph of these results.) Over half of all respondents listed their friends as a good source of reading recommendations, with parents coming in second place at 42%. Not surprisingly, readers, girls and Intermediate students show the strongest preference (70%) for taking book recommendations from their friends, but the other demographic groups showed the same trend. This data indicates that children are talking to each other about the books they read. As teachers, we encourage students to

discuss literature, and try to give them the tools to do this effectively in school (Close, 1990; Eeds & Wells, 1991). It is encouraging to know that 62% of children are using these skills in some capacity. Perhaps they are not analyzing characters together, but it seems clear that many of them discuss books with each other in at least a rudimentary capacity. Teachers can help foster this inclination by posting peer recommendation lists and encouraging students to talk about the books they read for pleasure during class time. These discussions will likely serve students well in the future.

Reading Habits:

Survey questions 20 to 24 dealt with students' reading habits outside of school. (See *Figures 6 to 8 in Appendix 6* for a detailed comparative graph of these results.) A surprising 60% of respondents considered reading to be part of their regular weekly routines. Junior students (77%) were more likely than Intermediates (50%) to read regularly, perhaps due to the increasing demands placed on older children's time, with sports, friendships and other social activities ranking higher on students' priority lists than reading for pleasure. More girls (70%) include reading in their weekly routine than boys (54%), and readers (70%) are far more likely to make time for reading outside of school than nonreaders (30%).

Despite some claims about their routines, this study showed that most students do a certain amount of weekly reading outside of school, as 70% of respondents claimed from ½ hour to 9 hours of weekly reading time. Only 6% of all respondents claimed not to read at all on a weekly basis. Most of

these students are nonreaders and /or boys, as 8% of boys and 21% of nonreaders claimed not to read at all. Also, 60% of all nonreaders claimed between ½ hour and 2 hours of weekly reading time, while 60% of their reader counterparts claimed a minimum of 2 hours.

These results can also be seen in question 20, where 75% of nonreaders never, rarely or sometimes read, while 65% of readers read often or as often as possible. Boys and Intermediate students are other groups which do not read as often as their peers, though there is not as drastic a discrepancy. 54% of boys claim to never, rarely or sometimes read, compared to 32% of their female peers. Also, 53% of Intermediate students, compared to 35% of Junior students, claim to read in the lower time categories. Though nonreaders show the strongest disparity in reading time compared to their peers, boys and Intermediate students are also spending consistently less time reading than their peers.

In question 22, students were asked what times of day they usually read. Not surprisingly, students rarely found time to read before school or during school breaks. All demographic groups, however, showed a strong preference for reading before bed. At least 50% of all demographic groups (including nonreaders), and 65% of all respondents claimed to read at this time. This information could be significant in helping students to develop regular reading patterns to promote lifelong reading, even once they have left school.

Accessibility of books:

Questions 11.3, 18 and 19 dealt with students' accessibility to books. (See *Figures 9 to 11* in *Appendix 6* for a detailed comparative graph of these results.) These questions sought to address the question of how much access students have to reading outside of school. All respondents had ready access to library books during the school year, but this portion of the survey evaluates their access to books at home and over the summer break of 2006. It is assumed that students with ready access to interesting reading material both at school and at home would be more likely to read in their spare time than those who did not.

Question 11.3 asked students where they got the books they read over the summer. A surprising 42% of all students purchased their summer reading books. In fact, all demographic groups except the nonreaders claimed a 40% or higher purchase rate for the books they read over the summer. This is perhaps indicative of the affluence of the population more than the students' interest in reading. Since this school is located in an affluent suburb of Ottawa, it is assumed that most of its students enjoy a middle to upper-middle class socio-economic status. Based on this data, it seems reasonable to expect that most families have extra money to spend on books to encourage their children's reading. There is not enough data to suggest that these students were themselves interested enough in books to make these purchases. The data does, however, indicate that almost half of all respondents were able to purchase books over the summer, and therefore, had access to self-chosen reading materials.

This research also indicates that children with many books in their home are more likely to consider themselves readers than those with few. 71% of nonreaders claimed to own 0-25 books themselves, while 71% of readers claimed 26-100 or more. This trend extends to books in the home which students do not own, as 79% of readers have 51-200 or more books, while 66% of nonreaders have between 0 and 100. These numbers support the theory that literate parents are more likely to have children who read, as nonreaders seem to have access to consistently fewer books than their self-identified reader peers. Of course, it is also possible that children who don't consider themselves to be readers do not pay as much attention to books as children who do. Perhaps the nonreaders simply do not notice that there are books in their homes because they are not interested in them. Though this is certainly possible, other results indicate a connection between few books in the home and nonreaders.

Chapter 5

Discussion & Conclusions

The results of this study paint an encouraging picture of Canadian children's personal reading activities. The children in this study seem to be doing at least some reading outside of school, and many of them enjoy it as a regular pastime. Though girls and Junior level students read consistently more than boys or Intermediate level students, all four groups generally have positive attitudes and do at least some recreational reading outside of school time. There is no significant difference between the reading habits of native English speakers and those of their peers who speak another language at home. This is perhaps simply indicative of effective integration. Many of these children have spent most of their lives in Canada, surrounded by Canadian culture and, as such, are not significantly different from their peers in either their language skills or their reading habits.

The willing non-reader:

Intermediate level boys and self-identified non-readers spend significantly less time reading for pleasure than other demographic groups, for a variety of reasons. However, most students even in these "risk" groups are not resistant to the idea of reading for pleasure. Many children in these groups expressed conditional interest in reading, suggesting that "the right book" would allow them to enjoy the experience. In fact, very few of these

children showed irreparably negative impressions of reading. Perhaps these resistant readers have simply not been exposed to enough of what they themselves would consider “good” literature. Building on those few positive reading experiences that students have encountered, and showing them how to find books they enjoy consistently, may help to change their opinions about reading for pleasure. With enough good reading to build from, it is perhaps possible for some of these resistant readers to change their opinions about reading for the better.

This reference to a conditional interest in reading was identified by several different types of students in the research. Many of these willing non-readers showed low literary self-awareness scores, indicating that they likely have difficulty choosing books that they will enjoy. Showing students how to choose good books consistently is the key to replicating students’ positive reading experiences. Teachers who spend more classroom time scrutinizing students’ favourite books and discussing in detail what elements and features make them “good”, would help students develop a clearer understanding of how to choose books for pleasure.

Promoting recreational reading at school:

Teachers spend a great deal of time choosing books to read to or with their classes. It has been shown that these choices are not always as loved by their students. If the purpose of a reading program is to promote a love of reading, perhaps these choices should be rethought, and student interests incorporated into the decision. One way for teachers to do this would be to

administer an informal reading interest survey at the start of each academic year. This would give teachers valuable information about their students' personal reading interests.

Although not every reading activity in should can or should be based on what students love to read, these types of books should still play an active role in a balanced reading program. Instead of consistently teaching novels from the novel study model, where all students read the same book, teachers could teach through literature circles, (Daniels, 2002; Blum, Lipsett & Yocom, 2002; Fogarty, 2006) where small groups of students read a variety of books. Students who are given a choice about the books they read and discuss at school are far more likely to engage in meaningful discussion than those who are handed a book and told to read it.

This study has demonstrated that children can and do discuss books with each other, both inside and outside of the classroom. The results indicate that they are more likely to accept book recommendations from their peers than they are from any other group. This tendency to talk to each other about books could be used in the classroom to promote reading interest. Teachers can help foster this inclination to promote reading interest by posting peer recommendation lists and encouraging students to talk about the books they read for pleasure during class time. These discussions will likely serve students well in the future. Teachers could also create a student-managed reading database, which could include a brief summary and evaluation of books they've read. Students who are looking for something new to read could browse the database for book recommendations from their

peers. Any classroom activities that promote free discussion about books will help students learn to articulate their opinions and interests more clearly, which may help them to choose consistently more enjoyable books.

Promoting reading at home:

It is no secret that a child's home environment has an impact on his or her reading behaviour (Hall & Coles; 1999; Neuman, 1986; Shapiro, 1994). Though certainly a good start, it is not sufficient to have great piles of books in a home if no one reads them. Children learn by modeling the behaviours of adults in their lives, and if families demonstrate that they value reading, children are more likely to value it as well. Habits developed at home can follow a child through into adulthood. If children are most likely to read regularly before bed, then this is a habit that parents can encourage. For myself, I was always anxious to stay awake for the extra 10 or 15 minutes my parents allotted each night for reading. As an adult, I still cherish those few minutes of quiet reading time before bed each night. This study indicates that many of today's children are likely to feel the same, if given the opportunity.

Future Work:

This study suggests that many children require help to identify the features and elements of books they consider enjoyable, and that this assistance would have an impact on their development as lifelong readers.

More research could be done to help teachers develop strategies which assist struggling students to find consistently enjoyable reading material. It has also been shown that, although few studies have asked them, many students are able to articulate their opinions about what they read. In fact, many of them are capable of meaningful, articulate discussion about books. These opinions could play a key role in further research. Children of diverse demographic groups with particularly high literary self-awareness scores could be gathered into focus groups to discuss in detail their reading preferences. The information gathered in such groups would be an excellent starting point for teachers who are trying to promote lifelong reading for enjoyment in their classrooms.

Impact on my teaching experience:

Recreational reading has provided me with uncounted hours of enjoyment throughout my life. I believe it has also made me a more articulate, well-informed and reflective person. It has certainly provided me with the skills I needed to become an effective student, teacher and writer. After working with reluctant readers, and seeing the impact that a positive reading experience can have, promoting lifelong reading in my students has become a primary goal of mine. This research has shown me that even the most reluctant reader can find joy in a book, and I am committed to helping all my students find at least a small part of that joy. I plan to take the time with my students to explore and celebrate both the books that I love and the books that they themselves love. I hope to learn more about how to guide

children to the “right books”, and I plan to investigate the books my students love to develop a greater understanding about their reading interests. My research has shown that building positive reading experiences can draw in the most reluctant readers and that can have a tremendous impact on the lifelong literacy of a child.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Survey of teen and pre-teen reading choices

Many people who take part in your education would like to know what kind of books you are interested in reading. This questionnaire is to help schools, publishers, libraries and booksellers provide the most suitable and enjoyable books for you. We need you to tell us what really goes on, so please don't just write what you think adults want to hear. Your answer will be completely private.

Please keep in mind, this information will only be useful if you are honest with your answers. Also, please remember that this is not a test, so don't worry about spelling, and feel free to write in point form.

+++++

1. First name: _____ boy girl
 Age: _____
 Grade: _____
 Teacher/Homeroom: _____
2. Do you speak a language other than English at home? yes no
3. If yes, which language? _____
4. Do you read in this language? yes no
5. Is it easy to find things you enjoy reading in this language? yes no

+++++

The following questions are not related to your skill at reading. They are only asking about how you see yourself as a reader. Some students may be strong readers, with very little interest in reading, while others may be weak readers, but enjoy reading anyway. Your interest in reading is the main factor for answering this question.

6. Do you consider yourself a reader (in any language)? yes no
7. Do you consider yourself a non-reader? yes no
8. Can you identify something (book, event, time, etc.) that turned you into a reader?
 yes no

If yes, please provide a brief description here: _____

Appendix 1

9. Please complete this sentence:

I think that reading is _____

+++++

10. Did you read any books this summer? yes no

11. Write down all the books that you have read this past summer. Put down the author's name as well, if you can. Don't worry if you can't remember all the books you read- just write what you can remember. If you remember more than 8 books you read, you can write them on the back of this page.

III. Please choose one answer:

1. It was given to me
2. I bought it
3. I got it from school
4. I borrowed it from the public
5. library
6. I borrowed it from a friend/family member
7. Other (please specify)

IV. Please choose one answer:

1. One of the best I ever read
2. I loved it
3. I liked it
4. I disliked it
5. I hated it

I. Book title	II. Author	III. Where did you get the book? (see examples above)	IV. What did you think of it? (see examples above)
		-	-

Appendix 1

- a) Have you read any of the books you put down more than once? If you have, go back and underline the title(s).
- b) Mark a * next to your favourite title. Why is this your favourite?
- c) Did you stop reading any of the books? If you did, mark an X next to the title you stopped reading. If you said yes, why did you stop reading a particular book?
- d) Have you read any of the books you put down more than once? If you have, go back and underline the title(s).
- e) Mark a * next to your favourite title. Why is this your favourite?
- f) Did you stop reading any of the books? If you did, mark an X next to the title you stopped reading. If you said yes, why did you stop reading a particular book?
- g) Have you read any of the books you put down more than once? If you have, go back and underline the title(s).
- h) Mark a * next to your favourite title. Why is this your favourite?
- i) Did you stop reading any of the books? If you did, mark an X next to the title you stopped reading. If you said yes, why did you stop reading a particular book?

+++++

12. Which question best describes yourself? (Choose one)

- I am an excellent reader
- I am a very good reader
- I am ok at reading
- I am not a very good reader
- I am a bad reader
- I am a very bad reader

13. What is your favourite book of all time? Was this book required reading for school? yes no

14. What do you like about it? (i.e. story, characters, ideas)

15. Do you have a favourite writer, or a favourite series of books? (If no, skip to question 16)

a) What made you keep reading books in this series or by this author?

b) What first gave you the idea to read this series/author?

16. Name a book you have read which you didn't like. Was this book required reading for school? yes no

Appendix 1

a) What did you dislike about it?

17. Who would you take advice about choosing books from? (Check all that apply)
- My parent
 - My brother
 - My sister
 - My friends
 - My teachers
 - A bookstore clerk
 - A librarian
 - Other _____
18. Which statement best describes you? (Check one)
- I do not own any books
 - I own 1-10 books
 - I own 11-25 books
 - I own 26-50 books
 - I own 51-100 books
 - I own more than 100 books
19. How many other books are in your home? (Check one)
- Less than 10
 - Between 10-50
 - Between 51-100
 - Between 101-200
 - More than 200
20. Check one statement that describes you best:
- I read as often as I can
 - I read often
 - I sometimes read
 - I rarely read
 - I avoid reading when I can
21. Is reading part of your weekly routine? yes no
22. When do you usually read? (Check all that apply)
- Before school
 - During holidays
 - On the weekend
 - After school
 - Before bed
 - During school breaks (recess, lunch, free time, etc)
 - Other _____

Appendix 1

23. Did you do any reading last night? (Check one)
- I did not read last night
 - I read for less than ½ hour last night
 - I read for ½ hour-1 ½ hours
 - 1 ½ - 2 ½ hours
 - 2 ½ - 3 ½ hours
 - More than 3 ½ hours
24. How often do you read?
- I do not read outside of school
 - I read less than ½ hour per week
 - I read between ½ hour and 2 hours per week
 - I read between 2-4 hours per week
 - I read between 5-9 hours per week
 - I read more than 10 hours per week
25. What do you like to read?
- stories, chapter books, novels (fiction)
 - books that give information (non-fiction)
 - poetry
 - magazines
 - newspapers
 - comics
 - graphic novels (manga)
 - web pages
 - other _____
26. What types of books do you read?
- science fiction
 - fantasy
 - romance
 - mystery
 - horror
 - animal-related
 - realistic fiction (real-life situations)
 - other _____

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. If there is anything else about your reading that you'd like me to know, please write it here.

Appendix 2

A guide to help students fill out the reading survey

Please go over the initial paragraph with the students. Stress the importance of honesty in their answers, and that they don't need to worry about spelling or writing style. Please note with students which questions (17-26) require either a single answer, or allow more than one choice.

Students do not need to write their full names.

1. Students are not required to answer this question if they do not wish to. It is only there for demographic data collection.

6-8. These questions are not related to students' skill at reading. They depend on students' self-perception only. Some students may be strong readers, with very little interest in reading, while others may be weak readers, but enjoy reading anyway.

11. Encourage students to write any books they remember reading this summer, even if they don't know the entire title or author name. They should write as many as they can remember, and continue on the back of the page if necessary.

11. b- c) Feel free to give students examples if they are having trouble with finding reasons for their answers. Encourage them to try and articulate why they liked or disliked things about a book. Some examples might be they related/didn't relate to characters; the plot was exciting /interesting/ boring/ funny etc.; stimulates thoughts/ ideas/ imagination; close/ far to their own lives; relaxing; setting was far/ close to home. Please give one or two suggestions only to students who are struggling with these types of questions, as I want to encourage them to come up with their own ideas, for the most part.

13,16. If students have trouble with these questions, ask them to think of a more recent book they have read that they loved/hated.

14, 15a), 16a) See question 11 b-c for suggestions.

17-24. Please make note of which questions require a single check, and which allow the student to check more than one option.

24. Check one.

25-26 Check all that apply. Also, if students need help with genres of books, please feel free to give them suitable examples. They are not required to know this information for the purposes of the survey.

Appendix 3

Letter for parents outlining consent to participate

Dear Parents;

My name is Barbara Healy, and I am a former WEJ Core French teacher (2003-2004). I have currently taken a leave from teaching to pursue a Master's Degree in Literacy Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, in Halifax, NS. As part of my thesis project, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr Jane Baskwill. As a teacher, I have always been interested in helping students to love reading. As such, the purpose of my thesis investigation is to examine the choices that young adult readers make, and to investigate the features of books that spark their interest. I am most interested in investigating students' thoughts and ideas about books from their own perspectives. I am inviting you to participate in my study, "What are youths reading? Young adults share their thoughts about what and why they read".

In this study, your child would fill out a survey questionnaire asking questions about the books he or she has read, and the things he or she enjoyed or disliked most about them. The survey also includes some basic questions about your child's reading habits and routines. After an initial analysis of the results, I will be inviting several participants to expand on their answers through interviews, held at the school. Please complete the attached form if you would allow your child to participate in an interview about what they choose to read later this year as part of this study. All students participating in the survey are asked to complete the attached ballot for a chance to win an exciting new young adult novel. Please note that the survey and interview are two different components—you may agree to allow your child to participate in one OR both parts of the study.

When the study is complete, I hope to provide insights to students and teachers about what young adults enjoy reading. I will be providing the school with the results to help make it easier for students to find great books. Your child's participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. Your child's privacy will not be compromised in any way by this study. Students will write their first names on their surveys, only for internal use to identify them for interviewing later. Students will be identified in the research analysis by age, grade and gender only. The school will not be named in the research publication, and no individual participants will be identified without their permission.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Barbara Healy, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED] or the faculty advisor, Dr Jane Baskwill, (902) 457-6189 jane.baskwill@msvu. This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact the University Research Ethics Board, by phone at 902-457-6350 or by e-mail at research@msvu.ca.

Sincerely;

Barbara Healy (Holdham)

Appendix 4
Consent to Participate Form

I agree to allow my child to participate in the research study What are youths reading? Young adults share their thoughts about what and why they read, being conducted by Barbara Healy, a master's graduate student in Literacy Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. Please read these rights with your child, complete this form and return it to school at your earliest convenience.

As a participant in this research, I have been informed that my child has particular personal rights, as outlined here:

1. I understand that my child has the right to confidentiality in all research-related situations.
2. Respecting this confidentiality, I understand that my child's name will not appear anywhere in the research unless I choose to be acknowledged. A pseudonym will be used for any direct reference to my child's answers.
3. My child has the right to withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. These reasons do not have to be shared with the researcher.
4. My child has the right to refuse to answer any of the questions asked of him/her for any reason. These reasons do not have to be shared with the researcher.
5. I am aware that participation in the study is voluntary.
6. I am aware that, should my child be invited to participate in an interview about his/her reading tastes, he/she has the right to view, verify, and comment on his/her transcript, and obtain a summary of the results.
7. I am aware that I have the right to contact Dr Jane Baskwill, thesis supervisor at (902) 457-6189 or email her at jane.baskwill@msvu.ca to inquire about the graduate student, or this study.
8. I allow my child to complete a survey as participation in this study.
 yes no
9. I allow my child to participate in an interview on school property, should he/she be invited to do so. yes no
10. I allow my child's voice to be audio taped during an interview on school property. yes no

Student's name: _____

Student's class: _____

Participant's signature

Date

Participant's legal guardian's signature

Date

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix 5

Genre Terminology

In order to consistently sort books identified by the students in this study, I used the following terminology. All books were sorted according to these genre criteria, chosen to reflect common book culture of children.

Adventure:

Fiction in which action, survival or a quest is the primary feature. Magic may play a secondary role. If magic plays a dominant role in the narrative, adventure books were categorized as Fantasy. Also includes nonfiction relating to pirates and other adventurous groups.

Animal Related:

Fiction in which the protagonist is an animal, or in which the prime relationship is between a human and an animal. Also, nonfiction relating to animals.

Biography:

Nonfiction that depicts the lives of real people. Autobiographies were also classified under this heading.

Comics/Humour:

Fiction which uses a comic strip format, including comic books, annuals and treasuries, such as Calvin and Hobbes. Graphic novels were given their own category. Also includes books in which comedy and the use of humour are prime features.

Coming of age/Realistic Fiction:

Fiction predominantly concerned with adolescent development in terms of self-discovery, family, peer and sexual relationships. Also includes realistic fiction which addresses current issues affecting teens, such as drugs, eating disorders and domestic violence

Fantasy:

Fiction in which magic and/or magical beings play a dominant role in the narrative, usually relating to an adventure and/or quest.

General Fiction:

Adult or children's fiction that are not classified in any other category.

Graphic Novels/Manga:

Comic style fiction that depicts complete stories, the length of a full novel. Includes Japanese style comics commonly known as manga.

Historical Fiction/History:

Fiction in which the setting is clearly historical, and a dominant characteristic of the narrative. Historical adventures will be categorized as Adventure. Also includes nonfiction that deals with history or world events.

Appendix 5

Horror:

Fiction in which the narrative is primarily centered around themes of horror or the supernatural.

Mystery/Suspense:

Fiction in which the narrative is driven by the resolution of a mystery or crime. Suspense and/or crime detection are primary themes.

Science Fiction:

Stories concerned with future worlds with an emphasis on the scientific or technological. May also include fiction in which an element of society is represented in a new way.

Sports:

Fiction in which some kind of sport is a central theme. Also includes magazines about sports.

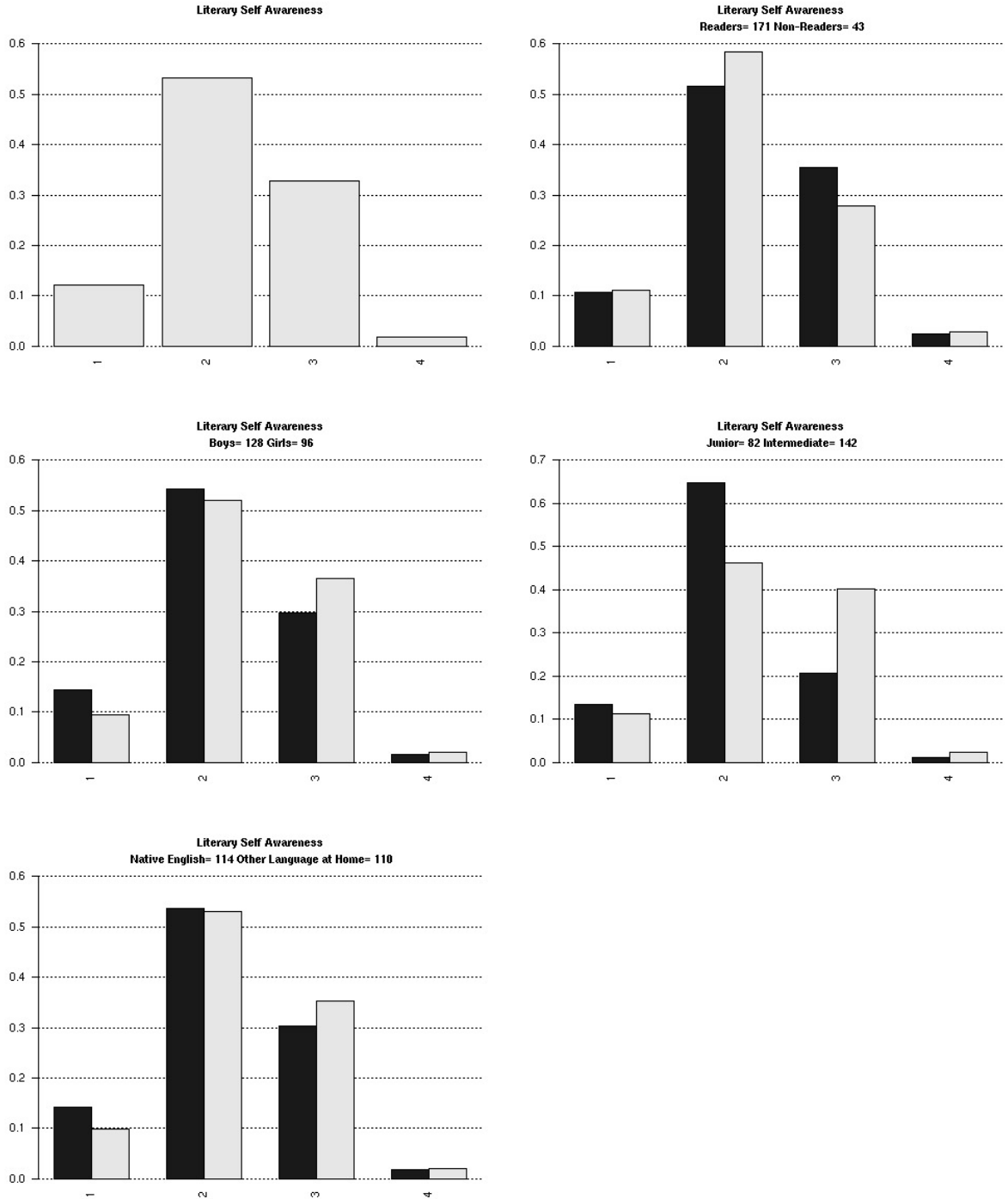
Other/Unclassifiable:

Game manuals, online fan fiction, magazines, picture books and other titles which did not easily fit into another category. Also includes titles which did not provide enough information to accurately classify them.

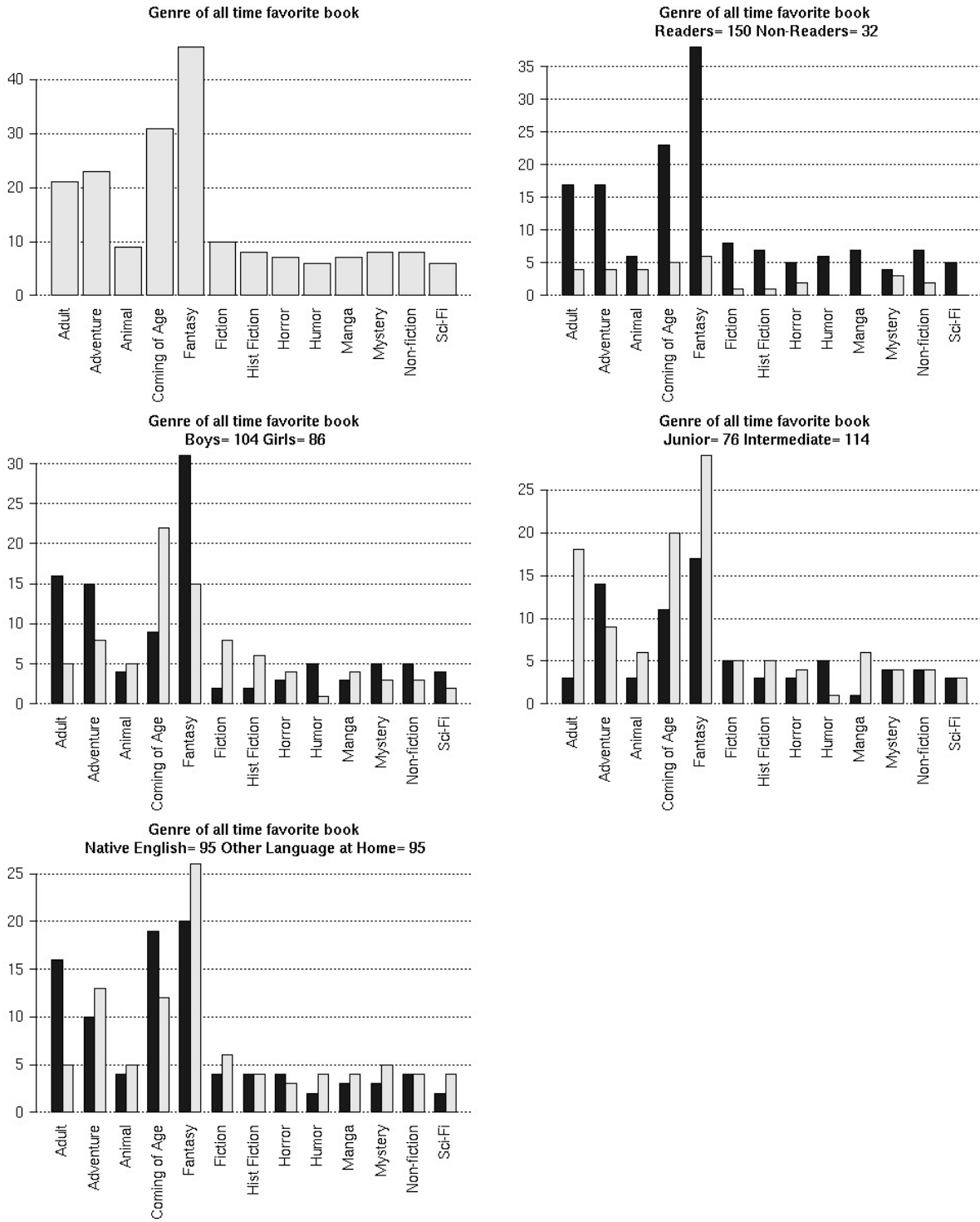
Appendix 6

Graphs Representing Specific Survey Questions

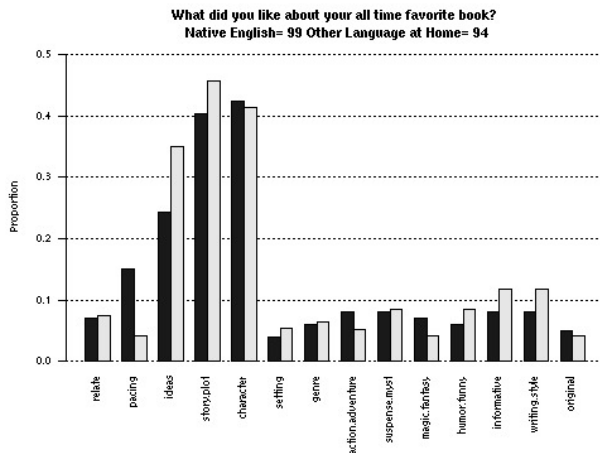
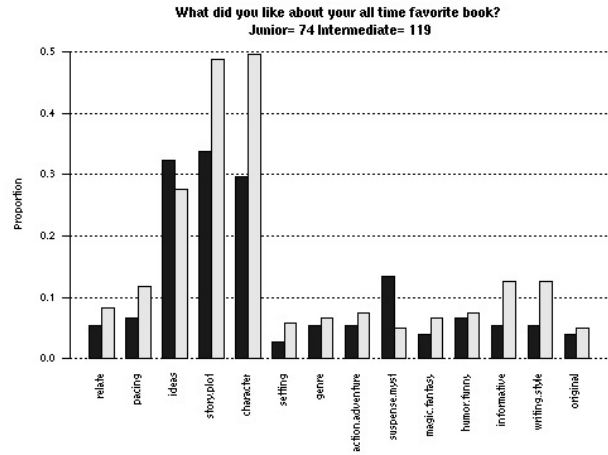
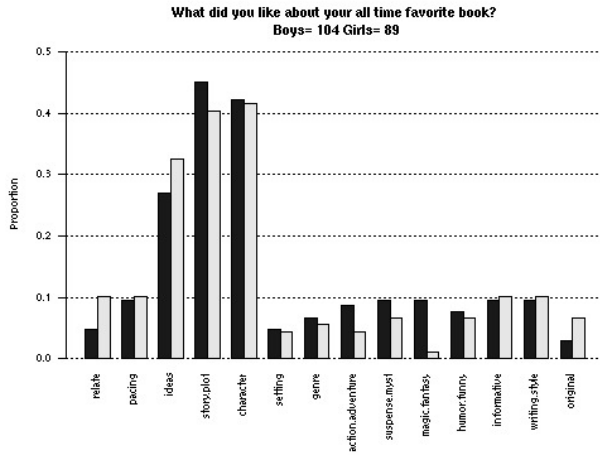
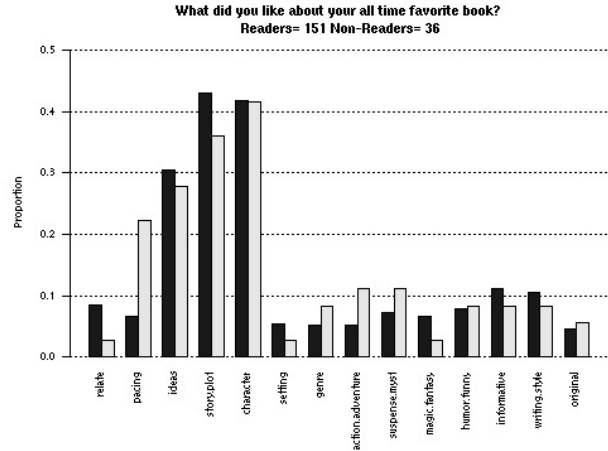
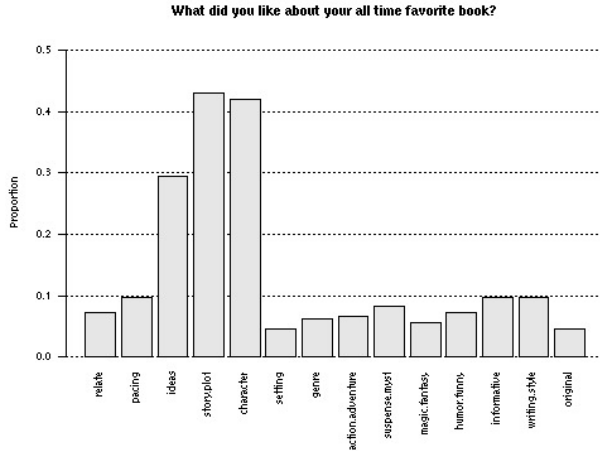
Figure 1: Literary Self-awareness



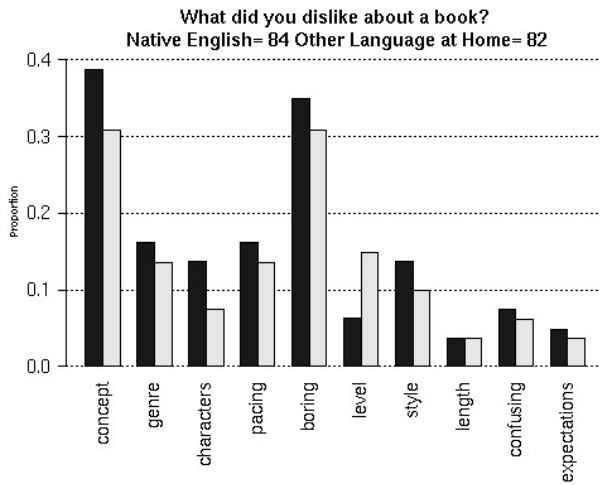
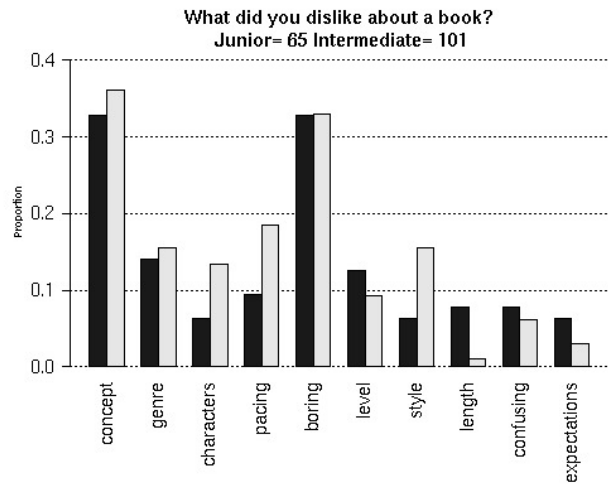
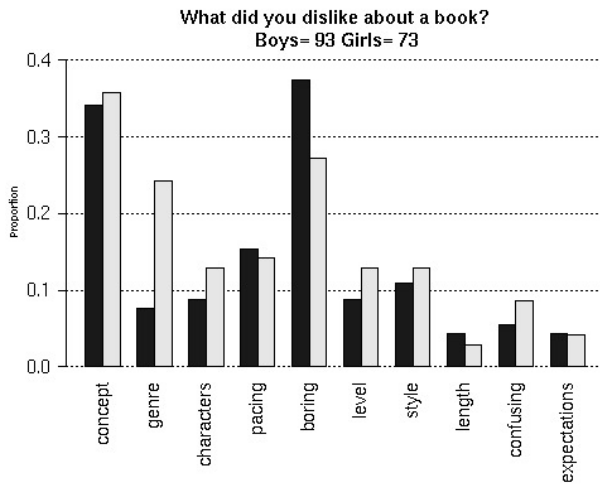
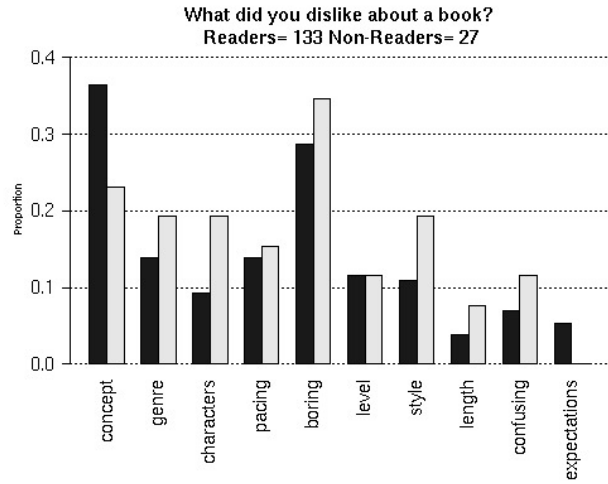
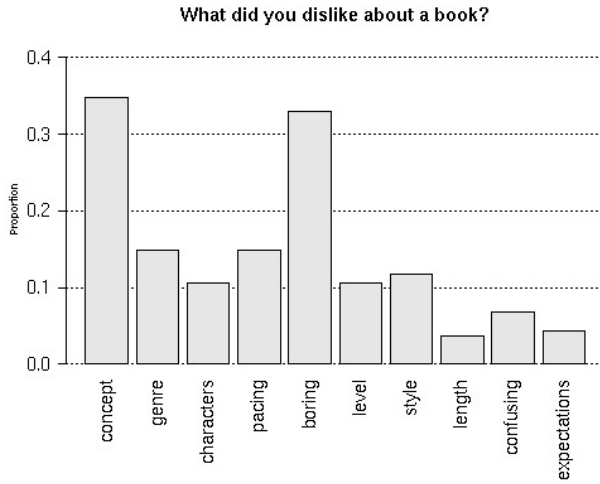
Appendix 6, Figure 2: Genre of All-time Favourite Book



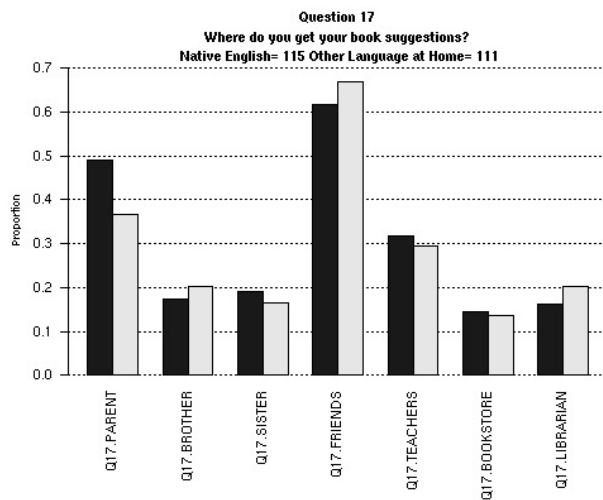
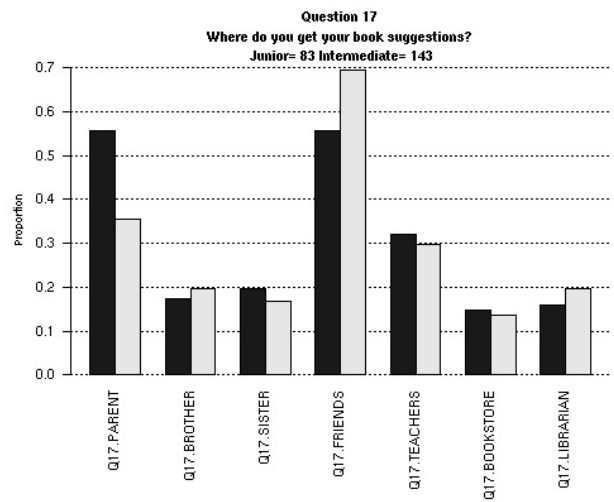
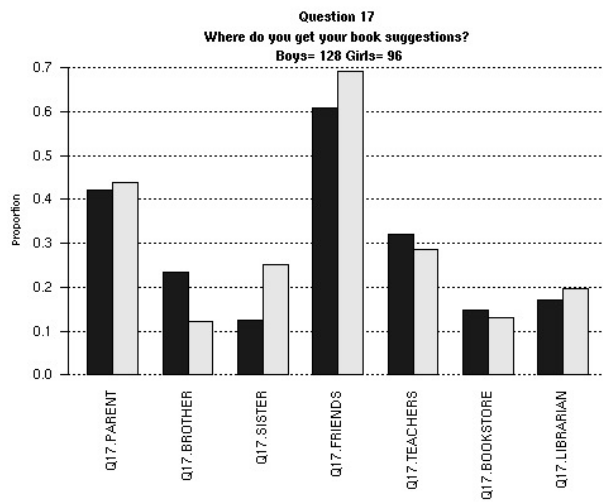
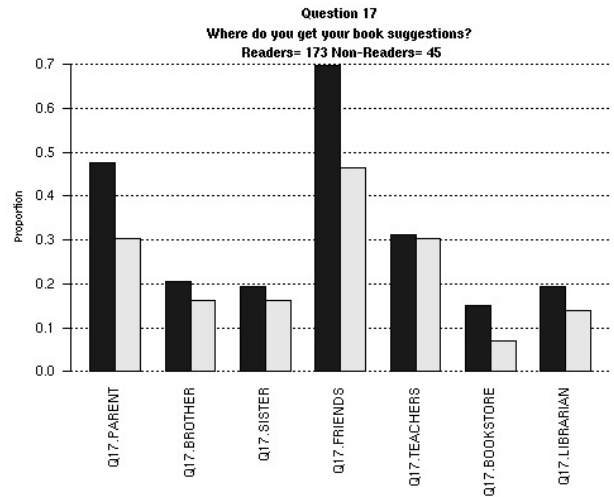
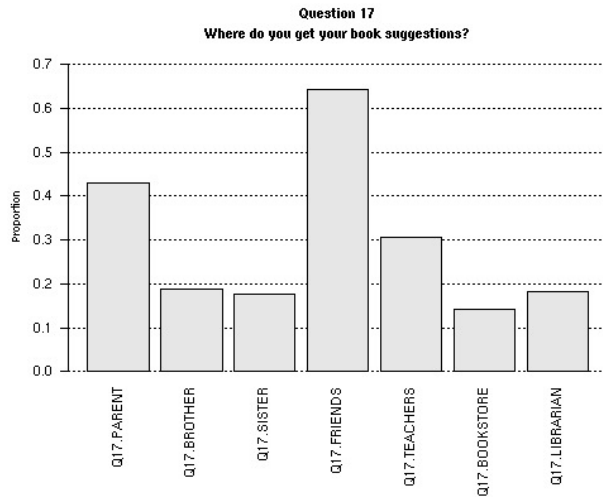
Appendix 6, Figure 3: What students liked about their all-time favourite book



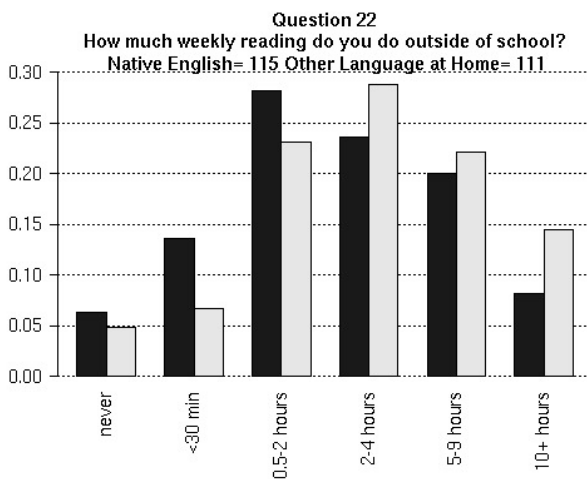
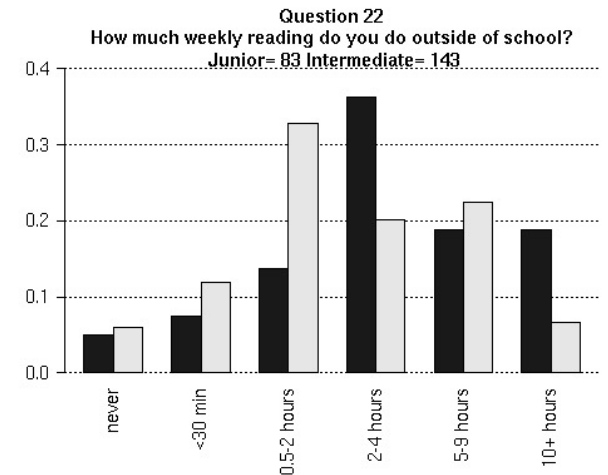
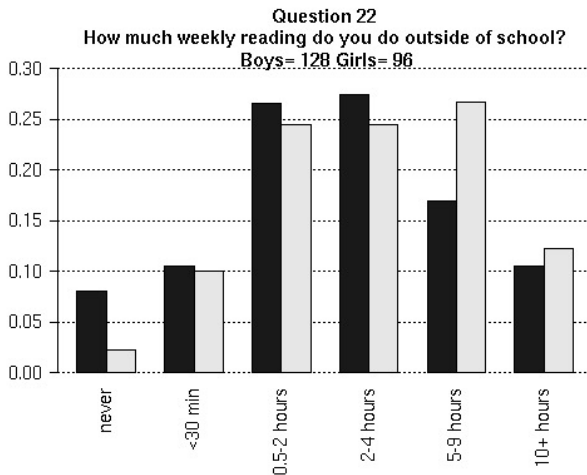
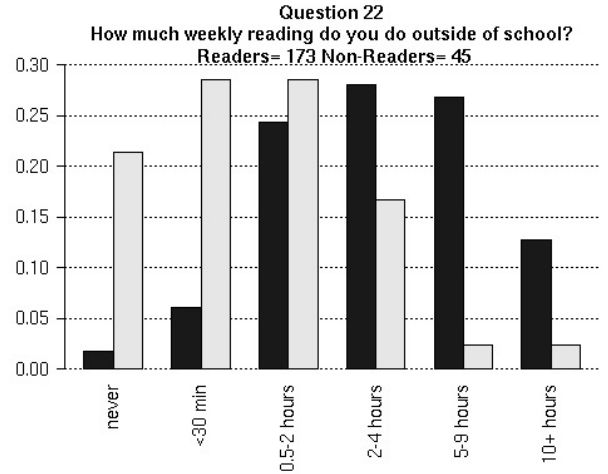
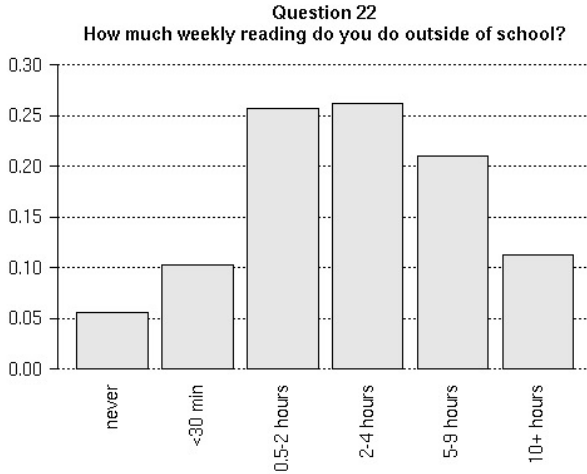
Appendix 6, Figure 4: What students disliked about a book



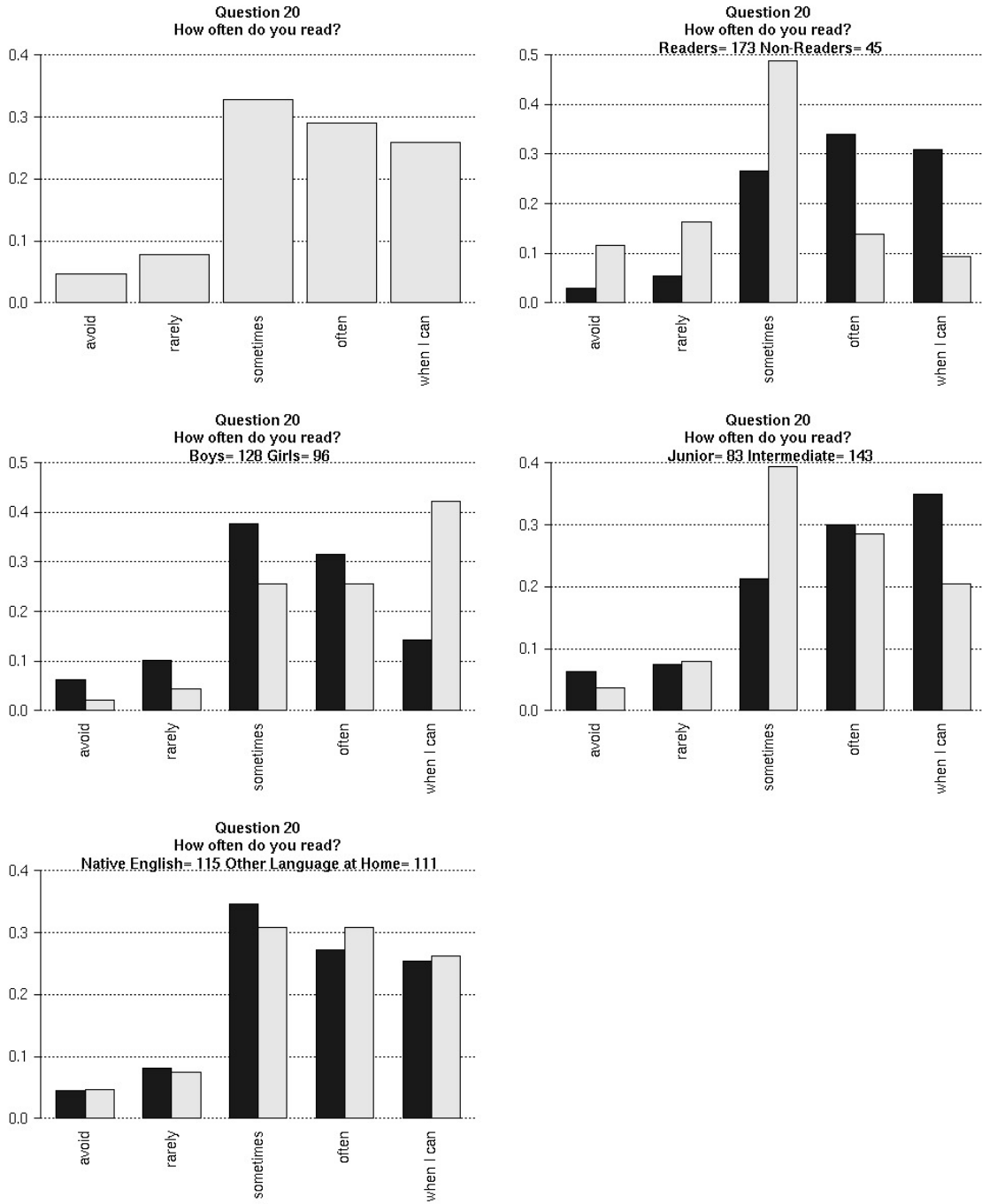
Appendix 6, Figure 5: Who students take recommendations from about what they read



Appendix 6, Figure 6: How much weekly reading students do

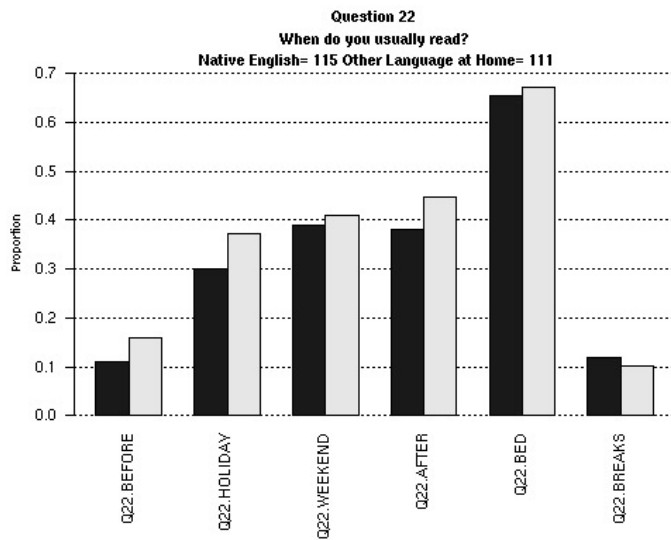
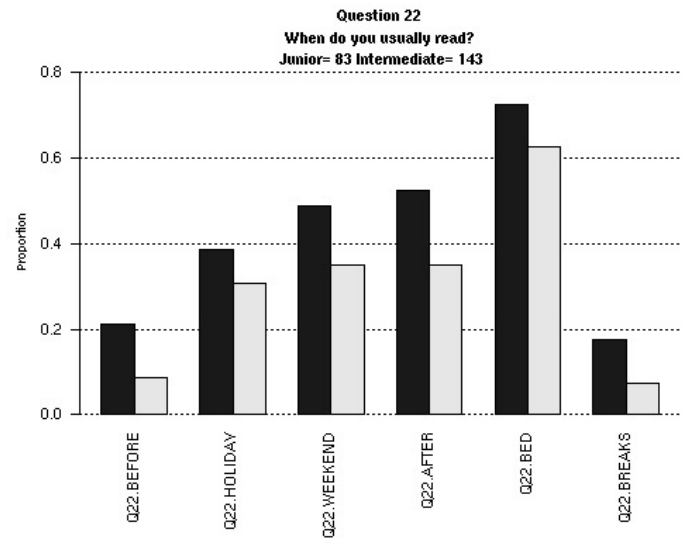
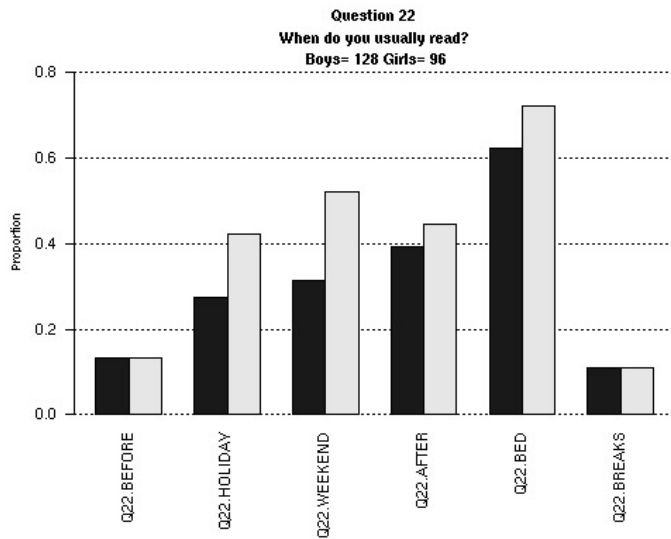
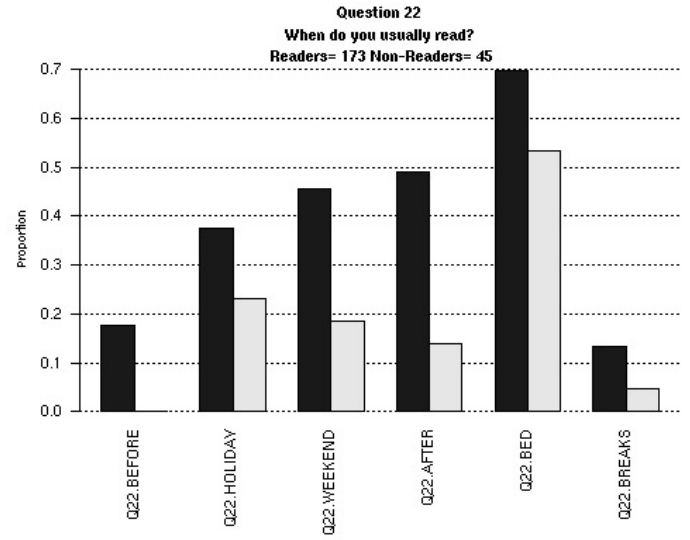
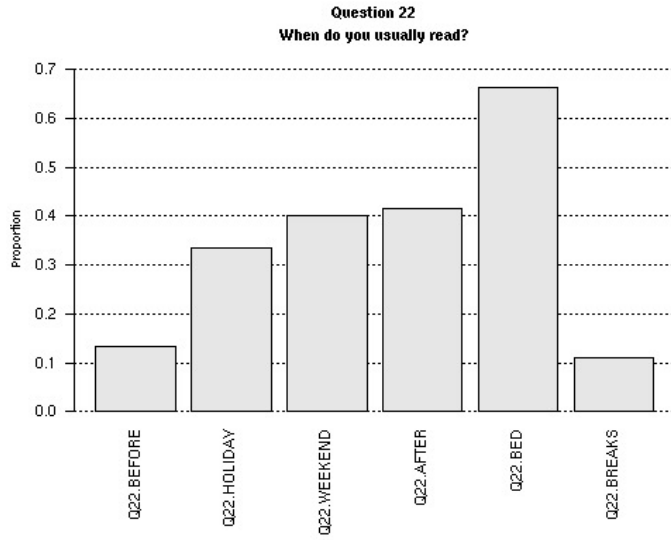


Appendix 6, Figure 7: How often students read

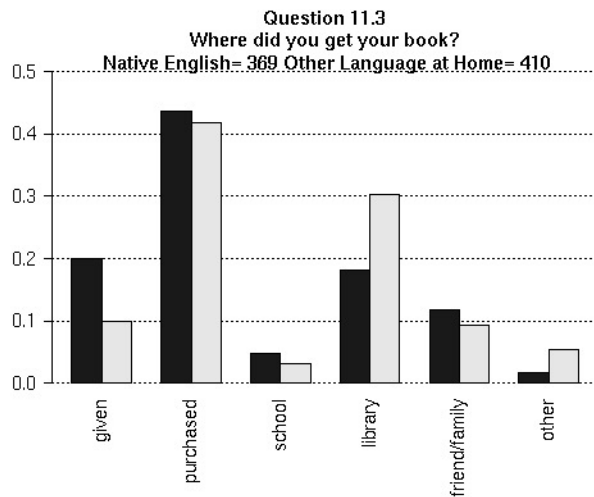
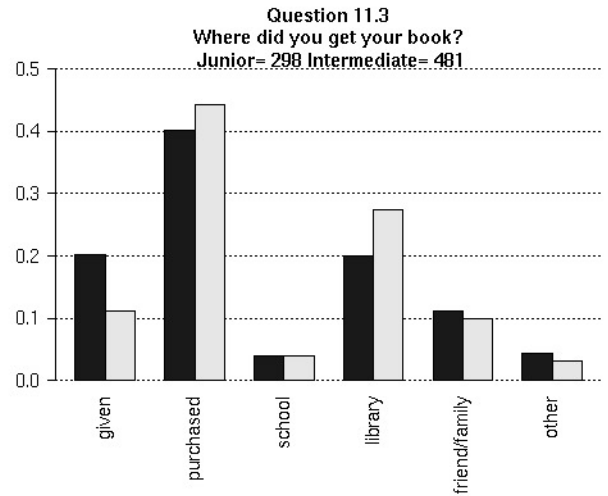
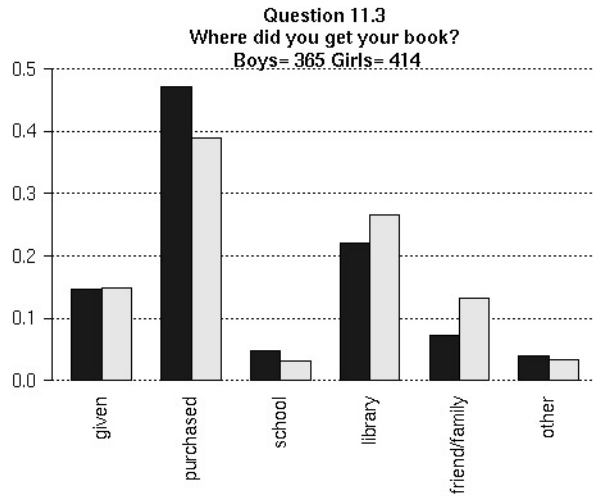
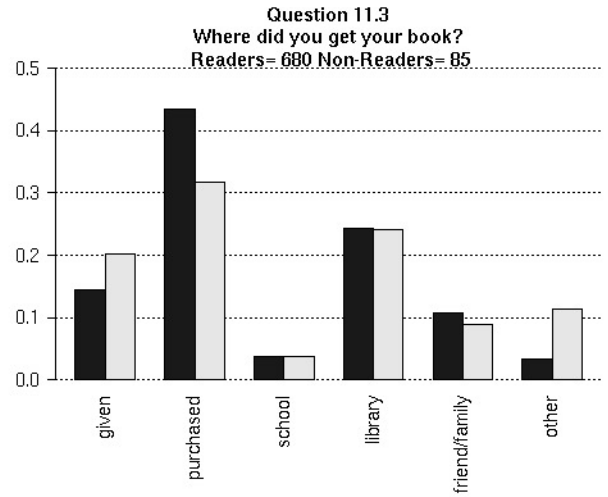
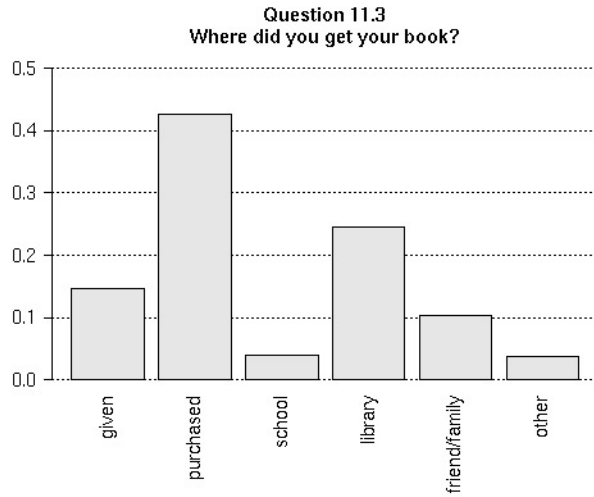


Appendix 6, Figure 8:

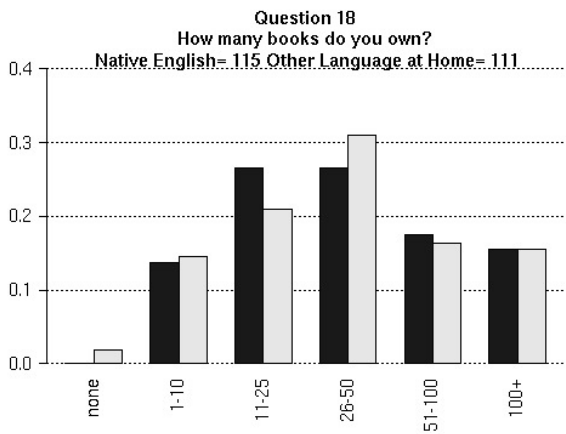
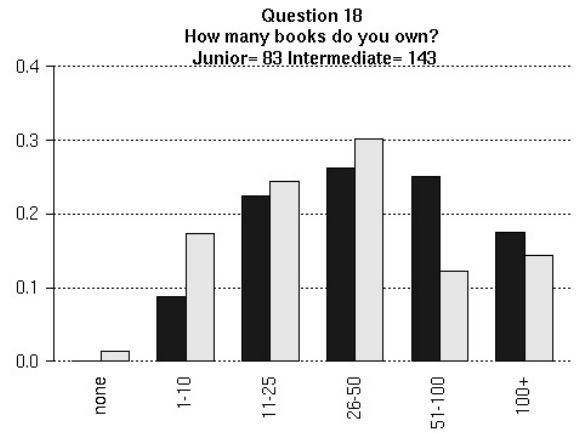
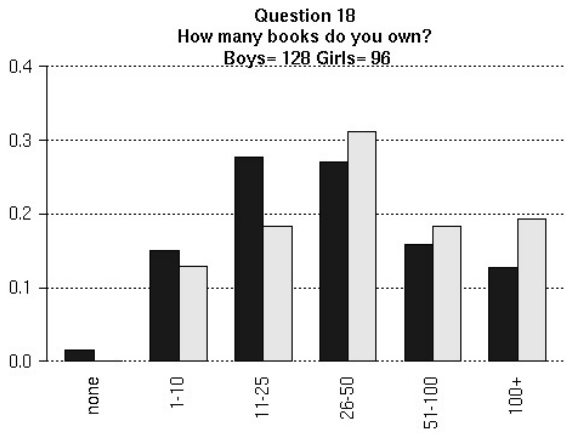
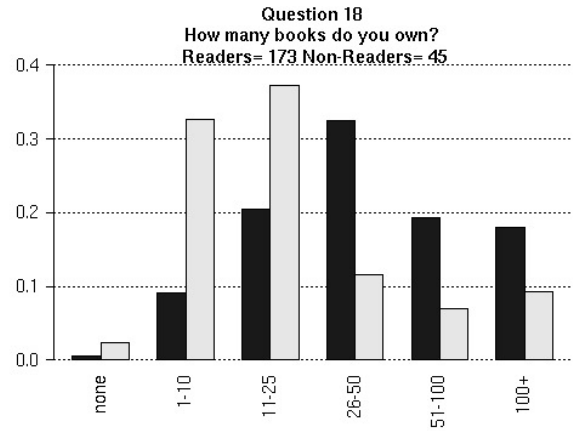
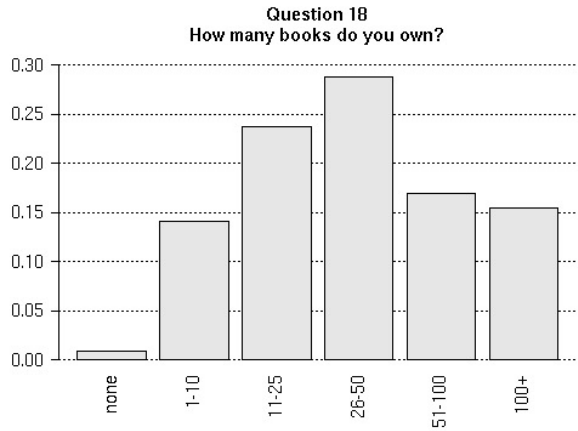
When do you usually read?



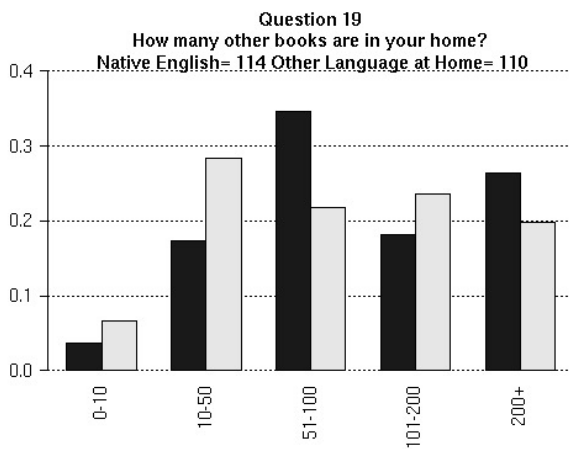
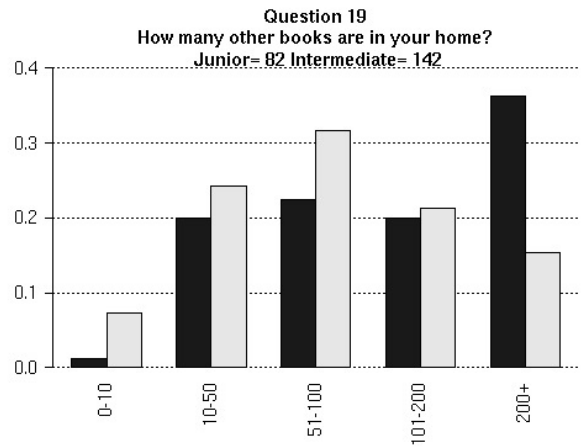
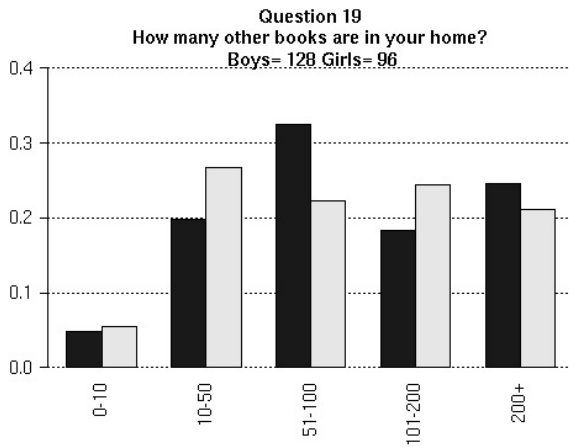
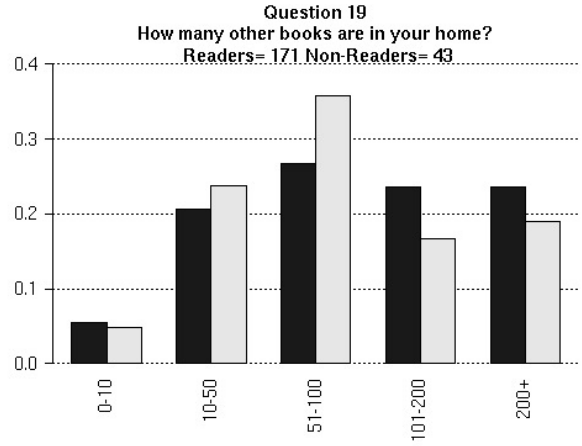
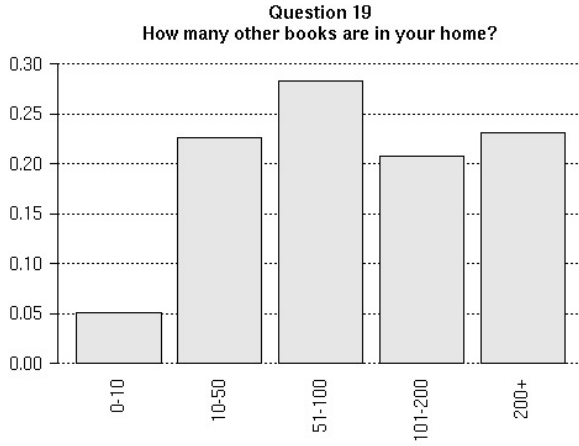
Appendix 6, Figure 9: Where students got their summer books



Appendix 6, Figure 10: How many books students own



Appendix 6, Figure 11: How many books are in students' homes



Appendix 7
Children's booklist of cited works

Series Books:

A-Z Mysteries Series. Roy, Ron.
Bailey School Kids Series. Thornton-Jones, Martha.
Clique Series. Harrison, Lisi.
Cirque du Freak Series. Shan, Darren.
Goosebumps Series. Stine, RL.
Harry Potter Series. Rowling, JK.
Magic Tree House Series. Osborne, Mary Pope.
A Series of Unfortunate Events. Snicket, Lemony.
Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants Series. Brashares, Ann.

Trilogy Books:

Oppel, Kenneth. Silverwing, Sunwing, Firewing.

Paolini, Christopher. The Inheritance Trilogy.
(Eragon, Eldest, Brisingr)

Pullman, Philip. His Dark Materials Trilogy.
(The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife, The Amber Spyglass)

Stroud, Jonathan. Bartimaeus Trilogy.
(The Amulet of Samarkand, The Golem's Eye, Ptolemy's Gate)

Tolkien, JRR. Lord of the Rings.
(The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers, Return of the King)

Individual Books:

Babbitt, Natalie. Tuck Everlasting.
Blackwood, Gary. Shakespeare Stealer.
Blume, Judy. Tales of a fourth grade nothing. Are you there God? It's me,
Margaret.
Dahl, Roald. Matilda. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.
Mowat, Farley. Owls in the Family.
Paulsen, Gary. Hatchet.
Sachar, Louis. Holes. Small Steps.
Simpson, Colton. Inside the Crips.
Snyder, Zylpha Keatley. Egypt Game.