When children hate to read: Understanding why

By Carol A. Gordon

The early years of reading are cloaked with warm, fuzzy memories: The music in the sounds of the words, the rhythm in the syntax of the language, and splashes of rainbow colours in the pictures make reading a sensory experience that evokes images, sounds, and meanings. For children, reading is interacting with text, it is a sensory experience shared with caring adults and other delighted children at home, in the classroom, and at the library.

In the fourth year of schooling something happens. The music stops and children find themselves reading in isolation. Adults stop reading to them. When they go to the school library they are involved in curriculum-based inquiry that may or may not offer choices for their reading selections. Informational text begins to dominate, and their reading world is no longer populated by fantasy and fiction. Reading becomes the serious business of reading to learn.

Most children make this transition seamlessly as the symbols on the page are associated with prior knowledge and emotional and social experiences. For others, the transition is not easy, and we begin to hear the dreaded refrain, 'I hate to read!'

Some children do not successfully make the transition from decoding text in the primary grades to developing deep comprehension in the secondary years. In the reading literature, children from grade four are designated 'adolescent' because they are expected to read independently at the appropriate level to build comprehension. Struggling readers at this age are often low-achievers who are disengaged from reading (Guthrie and Davis, 2003). They suffer from low self-efficacy, which '. . . refers to beliefs a person has about his or her capabilities to learn or perform preferences at designated levels.' (Schunk and Zimmerman, 1997, p. 34)

Struggling readers hold the belief that they cannot become good readers, and they have good reason to believe so. Reading at the level of frustration, even if the text is at the lowest possible level of difficulty, is a disincentive for reading that kills motivation. Reading motivation is a key concept in opening doors to reading for adolescents because it is related to self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). In the context of reading, intrinsic motivation is found to be a predictor of the amount and breadth of reading more often than extrinsic motivation (Wigfield and Guthrie, 1997). It is clear that without an effective intervention that addresses the affective dimensions of reading, illiterate adolescents suffer from a cumulative effect that makes it impossible for them to catch up with their classmates to read on grade level. There are many reasons why this happens. This event, regardless of the reason it occurs, calls for instruction that is guided, consistent, and nurturing. Such programs exist as remediation, in the early grades, there is no ongoing support for adolescents as they confront comprehension problems throughout their school careers.

This article addresses that core of children/adolescents who say with passion that they hate to read and a study that aims to help teacher-librarians to develop an understanding of this population in order to plan effective interventions that engage non-readers.

As technological changes revolutionise how adolescents spend their time, form relationships, and relate to real and virtual worlds, reading is going digital. Does this count as reading? The digital environment of the web has profound implications for literacy development since reading online is different from reading print. The horizontal pattern of online reading defies conventional rules as readers skim and scan across web pages, avoiding the deep and sustained reading (Rowlands & Nicholas, 2008) that builds comprehension (Guthrie, et. al., 2006). This explains why reading test scores have been flat, with no improvement over the two decades that adolescents have been spending time online 'reading'. Since reading is unmediated in online environments, it is likely that every reader at some point in time will hit their level of frustration and need help. Is there a place for the highly motivational and engaging digital environment to address reading motivation for struggling readers? Does the teacher-librarian have a role in the emerging literacy development of adolescents, particularly as it pertains to comprehension?

The digital environment of the web has profound implications for literacy development since reading online is different from reading print.

The traditional role has been one of support for reading in print environments demonstrated by activities such as book talks and fairs and author visits. These raise the profile of reading and generate interest, but do not directly involve youth in reading (Todd and Heinstrom, 2006, http://www2.lib.udel.edu/taskforce/study/phasetwo.pdf). For this

reason they are considered low level activities. Research strongly indicates that the best way to improve reading is to read (Krashen, 2004).

A second level of activities includes reading contests and programs that offer points and prizes for reading or a grade for 'book reports' or projects that students create based on their reading. Students are expected to compete, rather than cooperate (Guthrie and Davis, 2003) as they are held accountable for the quantity, rather than the quality of their reading. The reliance on extrinsic rewards and competition sabotages the development of intrinsic motivation that is linked to developing comprehension (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997).

A third level of reading initiatives actively involves students in reading and responding to their reading. These include student-authored book talks, book reviews, poetry slams, and sustained silent reading. These substantive approaches to reading motivation take place in a social context. Intrinsic motivation is supported as readers discover reading, responding to their reading, and sharing their responses.

What would happen if we used the digital environment of the World Wide Web to capitalise on the social networking, interactive Web 2.0 tools, and the energy and enthusiasm that young people bring to the internet? This happened in a high school in Massachusetts where students were invited to blog with their friends about the books they read. They chose their readings from a website with 12 ungraded, annotated lists, illustrated with book covers, which offered at least 25 titles in each category of genres and themes. A study in Massachusetts (Lu and Gordon, 2007) set out to determine if including these features of high interest books, many of which were requested by students through a pre-summer survey, would make a difference in reading attitudes and preferences. The program seemed successful until the researchers surveyed the students when they returned from summer vacation. One-third of the student population of 2000 ninth through twelfth graders (13 through 18 years of age) did not participate at all in the program. On their surveys they reported that they hated to read.

They actually did read, but their reading was in alternative media: newspapers, magazines, websites, comic books, manga, and commercial catalogues.

The researchers talked with ten focus groups of teens who reported that they hated to read. The results were interesting. Almost all the members of each focus group were adamant about their negative reading attitudes, but by the end of the one hour sessions, one or no students still insisted they hated to read. They actually did read, but their reading was in alternative media: newspapers, magazines, websites, comic books, manga, and commercial catalogues. (Lu and Gordon, 2007). These types of reading materials are not validated in schools as reading, and so these teens considered themselves non-readers. When asked whether they ever enjoyed a book, most chose books that they had read in their English/Language Arts classes. There seemed to be no pattern, however, to their favourite titles: Ethan Frome? Oliver Twist?

After some discussion the students revealed that they read these books in classes taught by teachers they liked. It was obvious that they could transfer their feelings about their teacher, the way s/he taught, and how the English class functioned, to how they felt about the books. The focus groups also talked about how they don't like to be forced to read, or to be told what to read (Gordon and Lu, 2008). The element of free choice emerged as a major factor in their attitudes toward reading. By the end of each focus group almost all students who said they hated to read admitted they do read and enjoy what they choose to read.

The idea of creating a website to motivate students to read moved to Delaware. The project, *Literacy and School Success*, grew from an in-service on action research, where literacy teams of school librarians and English Language Arts teachers explored literacy initiatives. In the first year, the members of the Department of Education decided to replicate the Massachusetts website project by working with two technical high schools to create a teen reading website. Data was collected by a pre- and post-summer survey of 500 students. The purpose of this research study was to examine how teachers, librarians, and students respond to a web-based environment that uses social networking tools to create a research-based transliteracy (Liu, 2007) experience where students are reading traditional print materials as well as digital text and images in variety of formats.

The project had three phases:

1. Four training workshops for participating educators;
2. The design, development and implementation of a web-based summer reading program, using a student-authored website and;The collection of data of pre- and post-summer data.
3. The study investigated several questions. This article focuses on the reading attitudes of the students.

What are the attitudes of adolescents toward reading?

The pre-survey, administered in June of the school year, collected demographic information about the students, their reading attitudes and preferences. Student website developers used the survey results to construct the reading lists. The pre-survey was administered to 598 students, grades nine through eleven, in two technical high schools. From these respondents, data from 490 was used in the analysis. Respondents were students in grades nine (61 per cent), ten (25 per cent), and eleven (14 per cent). Females comprised 54 per cent of the sample, and males 46 per cent. By ethnicity the sample included African Americans (44 per cent), Caucasians (36 per cent), Hispanics (14 per cent), and Other, which included individuals who were African American and Caucasian, or Hispanic and African, for example, (5.7 per cent). Less than one per cent was Asian.

An analysis of pre-survey responses reveals how adolescents feel about reading. 45 per cent of respondents say they like to read; 23 per cent sometimes like to read, and 32 per cent do not like to read (Fig. 1)
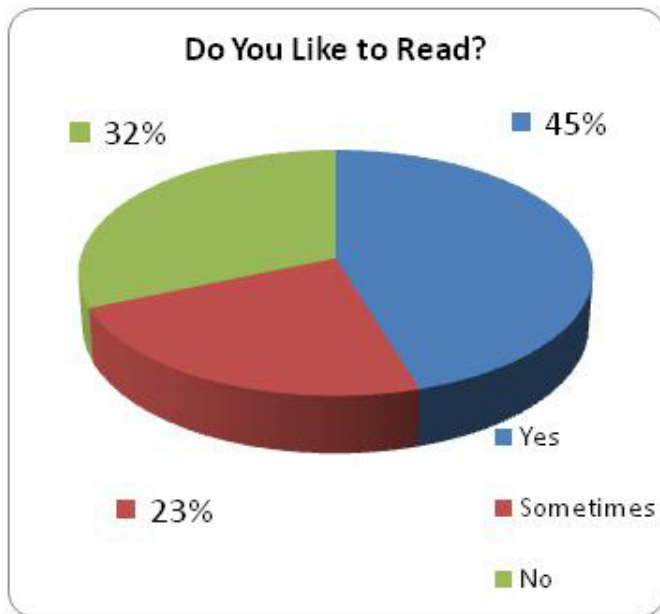

Figure 1: Do you like to read? n=490

An online survey on Google docs offered students an opportunity to elaborate, providing rich data that about their attitudes toward reading (Table 1).

I like to read because...	I sometimes like to read when...	I do not like to read because...
I can choose I LOVE to read	reading is free choice	I don't have free choice; DON'T FORCE US TO READ
I like the genre	the book is interesting	I can't find books I like
it takes me to another place	I can escape from my problems	No data
it is interesting and fun	No data	it's boring, a waste of time
it meets intellectual needs	it meets my intellectual needs	it's difficult mentally
it meets emotional needs	it meets my physical needs	it's difficult physically
it is something to do when I have time	I have time	I haven't got the time

Table 1: Do You Like to Read?

Similar categories from each of the three categories distinguish the attributes of students who like to read and students who do not like to read. The element of free choice was the one mentioned the most by all three groups. Students who like to read perceive that they have free choice. "Yes, I like to read because I read the books I want to." These students read outside school where they have opportunities to explore and find reading materials they like.

They mentioned specific genres and formats such as drama, realistic fiction, teen problems, romances, relationships, horror, mystery, urban fiction, action, sports, comic books, magazines, newspapers. For them it was a matter of getting the "right book" rather than having more opportunities to read. The effect of their reading is cumulative: "I LOVE (sic) to read . . . whenever I get a chance to read a really interesting book, it keeps me wanting to read more and more!" What distinguished those who like to read from the other categories is their ability to be transported by reading. ". . . it puts me in another world" or ". . . a place where you can be you're [sic] self."

They mention visualisation, preferring their own mental images, and using their imagination. ". . . I like to visualise what's happening in the book as if it was a television show;" ". . . I can actually imagine the characters in my head;" ". . . I would rather get a visual in my head then (sic) watch a movie and it also relaxes me;" ". . . you can do it at your own pace and can imagine your own thing. It's like television but you decide what you want everyone to look like." While they saw reading as interesting and fun, many viewed it as a way to meet their intellectual needs: developing language and reading skills, gaining new knowledge of the world, connecting with the author, and being intellectually stimulated. They mentioned often that reading met their emotional needs: it made them happy and relaxed. They read whenever they have time.

On the other hand, students who do not like to read do not perceive that they have free choice. ". . . we have to (read) in school." Since they do not read at home, these students feel that ". . . the majority of the time when I am reading it is not by choice . . .." They say, "I don't like to read in school because the books don't really interest me and we have to answer questions after we read." They express strong feelings about being forced to read. They are vague about what they liked to read, stressing that it should interesting or not be boring.

Typical comments include: "I can't find any books I enjoy;" ". . . the books are boring"; ". . . I can never find a book that gets my attention"; ". . . I can never get into a book when I read it." They never mention being transported by reading. Instead, they say they ". . . I would rather watch something than read it;" ". . . if there is a movie . . . you can watch that and finish the story in a couple of hours . . ." They do not talk about their intellectual needs. Instead, they describe the physical discomforts they experience when reading. "I don't like to sit still and stay quiet for too long; " ". . . it makes me tired;" ". . . my eyes hurt and it makes me sleepy; " ". . . I get headaches."

These students like to be active. They talk about how they could be doing other things. "I'm the kind of person who likes to be outside all the time; " ". . . I don't like sitting in silence." They are very aware that they lack the skills to read without difficulty. ". . . I don't really have the focus;" ". . . I have a hard time reading;" ". . . I just forget the things I read; ". . . I am not that good at reading and tend to stutter and I have problems pronouncing words;" ". . . I get distracted by other things;" ". . . I lose interest in things fast so if the book is slow I put it down;" ". . . I can't understand too much English and it makes it complicated to concentrate and read"; ". . . I suck at it so it's really hard to read and learn . . ."

They do not perceive that they have time to read and in several cases students cite working as a reason for this. These students do not see the relevancy or importance of reading: ". . . reading does nothing for my future." They feel that reading is ". . . boring. I have a life."

Many students who say they like to read sometimes express ambivalence about reading that is situational and contextual. The most frequent comment refers to free choice. When they enjoy reading they experience an escape from problems and enjoy the solitude, and some refer to being transported by reading. ". . . when I read I get pictures of people I know, places and memories that are brought back and I can connect to other people's stories." They noted that reading helps them escape from problems and they enjoy the solitude.

Some said they liked to read because it gives them something to do, and they read when they have time or ". . . I read . . . if it's required and I do it . . . usually I like the book but I don't do it voluntarily." Many do not like to be told to read. "I like to read if

"I like to read if it is something I have chosen and it is not forced on me."

it is something I have chosen and it is not forced on me." For these students it is more an issue of being told what to read. "The books they FORCE (sic) on us in school are boring . . . sometimes it just makes me want to quit reading altogether."

Nearly half of these respondents were genre specific about what they liked to read: magazines, action, teen books that are real life, realistic drama, addicts, book series, drugs, gangs, bible, food, manga, comic books, true stories, crime, web pages, and newspapers. These readers live in a very different world from those who say they like to read, but like enthusiastic readers, they like to read when they can identify with the situations. Intellectual needs that are met by reading were, for the most part, pragmatic, addressing language skills and reading ability. They like to read because "Sometimes you get to learn to read better" and "Reading new books is a way to learn . . ." For many of these students reading is a question of access; they would read more if they had more to read. Many of these respondents

expressed their emotional needs as being in the mood, relieving stress, or having nothing better to do. Like students who do not like to read, some ". . . don't like sitting around for a long time."

From the qualitative analysis of these data on how adolescents feel about reading, dimensions of reading motivation common to the three profiles emerge: perceived control; personal interests; intrinsic motivation; self-efficacy; and collaboration.

Implications for research and practice

The difference between being literate and being an independent reader lies in motivation. Phonemes, phonics, and word recognition equip young readers to decode the symbols they see on a page, but the real goal is deep comprehension. This does not happen without engagement, and engagement does not happen without continuous and sustained access to reading materials and supporting services. Libraries have an increasingly important role to play in disseminating empirical reading research and applying the research to initiatives that address the affective elements of reading engagement.

The difference between being literate and being an independent reader lies in motivation.

A personalised, rather than institutionalised approach to literacy support that defines reading engagement as motivated, strategic, knowledge driven, and socially interactive (Guthrie, et al., 2000) is critical to the future of youth services. Reading is more than a school subject; it is a personal experience that nurtures developing intellectual and emotional maturity. It has to be enjoyable, and even fun, inside as well as outside school. The summer reading website is a prototype for developing learning environments that promote multi-modal literacies, including information literacy and digital citizenship. Engaging youth in providing content through the use of interactive tools in collaborative settings can be a model for how we educate the youth of the future.

It is obvious that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to literacy development and that teaching and learning can take place successfully in alternative environments that provide print, digital, and human resources that inspire and support emerging literacy. More research is needed to study alterative models and the effects of specific interventions and activities that lead to diagnoses of online reading problems and prescriptions for ameliorating or curing these problems. New visions refine the role of libraries in literacies to create a community of learners for whom libraries are indispensible for their continuous reading improvement. This research can build on the rich literature surrounding literacy and apply what we already know about struggling readers to digital reading.

The voices of the adolescent respondents are telling us what scientific research has shown. Self- efficacy and intrinsic motivation are critical to developing the emerging comprehension of adolescents. Affective elements of reading are as important as the cognitive. Dimension of reading motivation emerge from the voices in this study: perceived control; personal interests; intrinsic motivation; self-efficacy; and collaboration. These constructs can be applied to developing a mature role in literacy development for librarians in school, academic, and public libraries that takes a holistic view of library collections and services. The constructs have implications for the way librarians develop their collections to support readers' advisement, reference help, and the design of reading programs and activities. Literacy support that is confined to the walls of the library can be re-imagined in real and virtual spaces where reading is integrated with stimulating tasks that originate in the interests, concerns, and needs of the reader.

References

Bandura, A. (1977) 'Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change' in *Psychological Review,* 84, pp. 191-215.

Gordon, C.A. & Lu, Y.L. (2008) 'I Hate to Read, or Do I? Low Achievers and Their Reading' in *School Library Media Research Online*, (11) Accessed May 15, 2011 from:
http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume11/ALA_print_layout_1_52246

Guthrie, J.T., Cox, K.E., Knowles, K.T., Buehl, M., Mazzoni, S., & Fasculo, L. (2000) 'Building Toward Coherent Instruction' in L Baker, J. Dreher, & J.T. Guthrie (Editors) *Engaging Young Readers: Promoting Achievement and Motivation (pp. 209-237). New York: Guilford.*

Guthrie, J.T. & Davis, M. H. (2003) 'Motivating Struggling Readers in Middle School through an Engagement Model of Classroom Practice' in *Reading and Writing Quarterly,* 19 (1), pp. 9-84.

Guthrie, J. T., Hoa, A.L.W., Wigfield, A., Tonks, S.M., Humenick, N.M., & Littles, E. (2006) 'Reading Motivation and Reading Comprehension Growth in the Later Elementary Years' in *Contemporary Educational Psychology,* 32 (3), pp. 82-313.

Krashen, S. D. (2004) *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research,* Second Edition, Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

Liu, A. (2007) 'Transliteracies Project: Research in the Technological, Social, and Cultural Practices of Online Reading.' Accessed May 15, 2011 at: http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2060/1908/

Lu, Y. L. & Gordon, C. A. (2007) 'Reading Takes You Places: A Study of a Web-Based Summer Reading Program' in *School Library Media Research,* 10 Accessed May 15, 2011 at: http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslpubsandjournals/slmrb/slmrcontents/volume10/lu_reading.cfm

Rowlands, I. & Nicholas, D. (2008) 'The Information Behavior of the Researcher of the Future' Accessed May 12, 2011 at: http://www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/programmes/reppres/gg_final_keynote_11012008.pdf

Schunk, D. H. and Zimmerman, B.J. (1997) 'Developing Self-Efficacious Readers and Writers: The Role of Social and Self-Regulatory Processes' in J.T. Guthrie and A. Wigfield, (Editors) *Reading Engagement: Motivating Readers Through Integrated Instruction.* Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Todd, R. J. & Heinstrom, J. (2006) *Report on Phase Two of Delaware School Library Survey: "Student Learning through Delaware's School Libraries," Part 2: Summary of Findings and Recommendations*. Governor's Task Force on School Libraries Accessed May 10, 2011 at: http://www2.lib.udel.edu/taskforce/study/phasetwo.pdf

Wigfield, A. & Guthrie, J. T. (1997) 'Relations of Children's Motivation for Reading to the Amount and Breadth of their Reading' in *Journal of Educational Psychology,* 89 (3), pp. 420 - 432.

Dr. Carol Gordon is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and Co-Director, Center for International Scholarship in School Libraries.

Email: carol.gordon@rutgers.edu