1-22-2014

Don't Underestimate the Power of Pleasure Reading

Jeffrey D. Wilhelm  
Boise State University

Michael W. Smith  
Temple University
We received similar testimonials from readers of horror and dystopian fiction as well, two genres that are characterized by the "populac". They attacked the powerful and long-lasting benefits of the reading our participants did against the temporary impact found in the New School study—any day!

But there is more at stake here. Kidd and Castano reported that their participants enjoyed literature less than they did popular fiction. Reading literature then becomes something like taking cod-liver oil: You might not like it, but it's good for you. The danger is that dismissing pleasure as unimportant runs afield of a remarkable new analysis done as part of the British Cohort Study, which is following the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland, and Wales in a single week of 1970.

"Reading for pleasure outside of school has real and long-standing benefits."

A recent report making use of the data from that study found that children's reading for pleasure outside of school had a significant impact on their educational attainment and social mobility. Moreover, it found that this impact is a function of what the researchers termed "increased cognitive progress over time."

Reading for pleasure outside of school has real and long-lasting benefits. The research from the British Cohort Study seems to us to create a policy imperative to encourage students' out-of-school reading—regardless of which genres and authors they choose.

If teachers and parents are to pursue a policy of supporting and encouraging the pleasure reading of young people, they must develop a deep understanding of its nature and varieties. They must avoid dismissing the reading kids like to do in the hope that kids will read something "better."

A word to the wise: listen hard to the wisdom of young readers of marginalized texts, who, as they read these texts, are deepening their understanding of themselves in the world and expanding the possibilities of who they might become.}

JEFFREY D. WILHELM is a professor of English education and the director of the Boise State Writing Project at Boise State University, in Idaho. MICHAEL W. SMITH is associate dean of faculty development and academic affairs in the college of education at Temple University, in Philadelphia. They are the authors, with Sharon Frances, of Reading Unbound: Why Kids Need to Read What They Want—and Why We Should Let Them (Scholastic Teaching Resources, December 2013).