

Mrs. Mosdell
English 10&11
B5
February 20, 2018

The Decline of Reading

When was the last time you picked up a book for fun that wasn't required reading for school? The National Endowment for the Arts (an independent government agency) has been collecting information about the rates of adults and teens reading in the United States. Since 1980, the NEA has found that reading rates have been in decline. In 2004, the NEA found that fewer than half of adults are reading literature. Literature is defined as fiction, poetry, and biographical nonfiction (Cook). Interestingly, it has been found that, "The biggest driver of literary reading appears to be education" (Ingraham). 68% of people with graduate degrees state that they read for leisure, while 59% of people with a Bachelor's do, and from there, a mere 30% of people with a high school education report reading for leisure (Ingraham). Times are changing, however. More and more focus is put into our mobile devices, especially our cell phones. Is this proficiency going to be more important than actual reading? Despite calls for matching our literacy to our times, reading books on a regular basis is important to our society because reading fiction and biographical works promotes empathy and creativity, and leads to solid academic success.

Reading literature builds a sense of empathy, which current society is lacking. Empathy is defined as, "the ability to understand and share the feeling of another" (June). In an interview with Dr. Michele Borba, columnist Laura June discovered the consequences of a lack of empathy. Borba explains that empathy leads to cruel behaviors in children that evolve into bigger, often tragic, situations in adulthood. A lack of empathy is often at the heart of terrorist

actions, school shootings, and other similar tragedies (June). June writes, "...Empathy is something we as a society have devalued and, as a result, it has 'plummeted' in recent years."

Additionally, Dr. Borba says, "Our culture has undergone a seismic shift...Self-promotion, personal branding, and self-interest at the exclusion of others' feelings, needs, and concerns... is permeating our culture and eroding our children's character." So how does reading fix this?

While reading a book, one often sees directly into the life of another character; real or fictional. Readers see their development, their growth, their potential, and also their thoughts and feelings. Often, readers develop some emotional attachment to characters, and often have real emotional reactions to the bad things that happen to these characters. While empathy is a learned behavior that doesn't only come from reading, reading is a great teacher of empathy (June, Ingraham). In light of recent tragedies in schools already this year, couldn't we all stand to have a little more empathy for the people around us?

Another important skill taught by reading literature is creativity. Reading promotes creativity through the visualization of people, and places where books take place. During reading, the imagination has to work to recreate the words as images. This important skill leads to other forms of creativity, and makes our reading meaningful. As society drifts more and more toward film representations, one has to wonder where all of that came from. Many movies are based off of books or series. What happens if people stop reading and imagining? Will our well of creativity dry up (Kramer)? Not only does this apply to our entertainment, but creativity and deep, critical thinking skills promoted through reading translate into an even graver idea: society's deep seated problems like world hunger, poverty, and disease. Creativity is a component to innovation and change (Brown). If children lose this early skill of creating images

of what they read in their minds, will they also lose the creativity and imagination needed to solve the major problems that face them (Kramer)?

Proponents of digital literacy argue that while there is a decline in reading, it is being replaced with other, digital formats. They argue that literacy is changing and we need to adapt to new kinds of literacy. In Shakespeare's time, most people went to his plays, but they didn't read them. Technology also does have its advantages; we have greater knowledge of other cultures, they're new and exciting, and they put information right into our hands. This kind of media is also less expensive (even subscription based medias like Netflix) than regular paper books. Books are also unable to compete with the constant stimulus provided by our mobile devices (English). While it is true that literacy is changing, and that young people need to be prepared to work with these digital formats, technology and its constant stimulus decreases our ability to connect with other people empathetically. The constant self-centered focus that our technology promotes decreases our ability to focus on other people's feelings and opinions. Ultimately, digital formats and devices are not the answer to the literacy problem in the United States.

Not only do devices distract and decrease our empathy, and often our creative skills, they also impact our ability to read well. The National Endowment of the Arts discovered that between 1992 and 2005, the percentage of 12th graders to could read proficiently decreased from 40% to 25% (Kramer). The biggest problem with this statistic is that the NEA also found that, "Any decline in reading ability indicates a corresponding decline in overall academic accomplishment" (Kramer). So not only do students read less well, they also do poorly in other areas. In a world focused on STEM education, the loss of reading proficiency can also decrease success in these fields. High school juniors and seniors are often bombarded with the alarming

statistics that education equals monetary success. So less success at reading leads to less academic success and ultimately to less success after their education is complete. Reading is a life-long skill, and reading for pleasure is just as important as reading information for an occupation.

Literacy in America is a huge issue. Reading literature or works of fiction increases empathy, promotes creativity, and leads to academic and life success. The NEA report states,

The accelerating declines in literary reading among all demographic groups of American adults indicate an imminent cultural crisis...unless some effective solution is found literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen (Kramer).

Encouraging people to read for entertainment for at least a few minutes a day could drastically change our world and the people living in it. So, go to the library and pick out a good book!

Works Cited

- Brown, Brene. "Listening to Shame." *TED2012*, March 2012.
https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame
- Cook, Kathryn and Micah L. Issitt. "Decline of Reading: An Overview." *Points of View*, March 1, 2016, p1. February 16, 2018.
- English, Marlanda and W. E. Jacobs. "Point: The Digital Revolution has Reduced Reading Comprehension." *Points of View*, March 1, 2016, p2. February 16, 2018.
- Ingraham, Christopher. "The Long, Steady Decline of Literary Reading." *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2016. February 19, 2018.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/09/07/the-long-steady-decline-of-literary-reading/?utm_term=.dec9d62d3e07.
- June, Laura. "Why Empathy Is the Most Important Skill You Can Teach Your Kids." *The Cut*, June 20, 2016. February 19, 2018.
<https://www.thecut.com/2016/06/unselfie-michele-borba.html>.
- Kramer, Otis and Geraldine Wagner. "Counterpoint: The Decline of Reading in the U. S. Damages our Intellectual Life." *Points of View*, March 1, 2016, p3. February 19, 2018.