

THE READING INTERESTS
AND
HABITS OF ADULTS

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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PREFACE

For several years the members of the American Association for Adult Education and of the American Library Association have had a growing conviction that the success of the adult education work of libraries, and of many other agencies, depends in a large measure on the kind of reading habits with which young people and adults are equipped or can be helped to develop. Furthermore, the fact has long been recognized that not enough is known about the reading habits of actual and potential patrons of libraries, nor about the influences which determine the development of reading habits, to proceed with confidence on a program of adult education involving reading and the use of libraries. Accordingly, at the request of the Commission on the Library and Adult Education, a committee was appointed in January, 1927, to consider the desirability of an investigation of reading habits and to recommend a plan of procedure. After a series of conferences with librarians and educational experts, the Committee recommended that provision be made for a preliminary study of reading habits, on the basis of which plans for a thorough investigation and comprehensive report could be prepared.

In harmony with this proposal, five librarians and educators were asked to undertake the preliminary study. The necessary funds were provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The members of the group included C. C. Williamson, Director of the School of Library Service, Columbia University (chairman); William S.

Gray, Dean of the College of Education, University of Chicago; Effie Power, Director of Work with Children, Cleveland Public Library; E. L. Thorndike, Teachers College, Columbia University; and Dr. Henry Suzzallo. The first meeting of the committee, held in New York City on December 13, 1927, was attended also by Frederick P. Keppel, President of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Carl H. Milam, Secretary of the American Library Association, and Morse A. Cartwright, Executive Director of the American Association for Adult Education.

The general problem which the group set up for itself was "to discover what is in the experience of some persons which causes them to acquire and continue desirable habits of reading and what is lacking from the experience of others which leaves them without such habits." The preliminary study, which was to be completed in six months, comprises (1) a digest of the investigations of reading and related subjects which have a bearing on adult education; (2) case studies of about three hundred adults representing various social groups, to determine the influences which account for their reading habits; and (3) plans for additional investigations which will contribute to a clearer understanding of adult reading problems. Specific responsibility for the preliminary study was assigned to Dean William S. Gray, who secured the assistance of Ruth Munroe, formerly assistant in the Cleveland Public Library, to make the case studies. The results of the study, excepting the plans for subsequent investigations, are presented in this volume.

Opportunity is taken at this point to express keen appreciation of the permission granted by various authors and publishers to quote from the books and reports referred to in the chapters that follow.

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PART I

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE REPORT

THE READING INTERESTS AND HABITS OF ADULTS

CHAPTER I

Introduction

THE PROBLEM

The efforts of libraries and other agencies to promote adult education activities have awakened deep interest during recent years in the reading interests and habits of adults. Keen interest in reading habits may be attributed largely to two facts: first, many of the activities involved in the process of self-education require the wide use of reading; and second, a surprisingly large number of adults are not interested in reading, are unable to read well, or fail to read desirable types of material.

Experience has taught that before desirable reading habits can be established on the part of many young people much information is needed concerning their present reading activities and the influences that have determined their development. Accordingly, the chief purpose of this report is to summarize the various facts which are available concerning the reading activities of young people and adults. Part II comprises summaries of the results of scientific studies relating to the reading interests and habits of adults, and also of children in so far as they contribute to an understanding of adult read-

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ing problems. Part III presents the results of about three hundred case studies of reading habits which were made as a part of this investigation. Part IV presents conclusions based on the summaries of previous investigations and on the reports of case studies.

TYPES OF STUDIES SUMMARIZED

In preparing the summaries reported in Part II use was made of the results of both published and unpublished investigations. It is a significant fact that since 1900 more than eight hundred studies of reading interests and habits have been reported. Of these, approximately one hundred are concerned directly with the reading activities of adults. Many others contain information of great value in understanding the reading interests and habits of adults.

The chief aims in summarizing these studies were to discover the motives that prompt people to read, the influences which stimulate keen interest in reading, the amount and kind of reading that is done, the types of books and magazines preferred, the parts of newspapers and magazines read, and the effect of such factors as age, sex, race, nationality, education, and type of community on the amount and character of the reading that is done. As the study of the content of the various reports proceeded, it became evident that the most important contributions that they contain relate to four major topics. They are listed here in the order in which they will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The status of reading in American life.

The amount and character of adult reading and factors that influence it.

The reading interests of special groups of young people and adults.

The reading interests of elementary and high-school pupils.

THE PURPOSES AND NATURE OF THE CASE STUDIES

The chief purpose in making the case studies reported in Part III was to secure detailed information concerning the reading interests and habits of adults and the influences that contribute to their development. An additional aim was to determine the usefulness of certain techniques in making case studies. Since these studies were experimental in character, those described in this volume are not presented as finished pieces of research. The facts which they reveal, however, proved of great value in reaching the more or less tentative conclusions presented in Part IV.

The case studies fall naturally into three groups. The first includes studies of the reading interests and habits of one hundred adults of an urban community; namely, Hyde Park, Chicago, which were made by means of brief interviews. The second includes similar studies of one hundred seventy adults in a suburban community; namely, North Evanston, Illinois. The third includes more intensive studies of a small number of adults in whom the reading habit was well established. The important facts secured in each of these three types of studies will be presented in subsequent chapters.

VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the final section of this report is to present conclusions concerning the reading interests and habits of adults which are supported by the evidence summarized in Part II and Part III. An effort was made in stating the conclusions to give prominence to the most significant findings and to suggest problems which merit additional study. Many of the conclusions that are sug-

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gested concerning adult reading problems are only tentative owing to the incompleteness of the data relating to them and to possible inaccuracies in some of the studies which have been summarized in this report.

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method was used which makes possible the comparison of the data relating to the amount of reading material in the home of the subject with the amount of reading material in the home of the subject.

PART II

SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATIONS RELATING TO READING INTERESTS AND HABITS

CHAPTER II

The Status of Reading in American Life

THE PROBLEM

In a nation-wide study of adult reading interests and habits, it is important to know the extent to which Americans read today and the tendencies which have developed during the past few decades. It is also desirable to know if reading proclivities are exhibited to the same degree in the various states. To put the issue in other terms, do the problems of adult education, as far as they concern reading, vary notably in different sections of the country? The discussion of these problems will be introduced by presenting facts relating to the increase in the number of newspapers, periodicals, and books that have been published during the past few decades.

INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS PUBLISHED

Evidence from various sources indicates that interest in newspapers and periodicals has increased in the United States at a tremendous rate during the last fifty years. A comparison, for example, of the total number of different newspapers and periodicals published in 1883 and in 1927, as presented in Table I, shows an increase of almost one hundred per cent during that period. An analysis of the entries in the table shows that the largest increases have

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been in the number of daily newspapers and monthly periodicals published.

TABLE I*

NUMBER OF NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES AND ITS TERRITORIES IN 1883 AND IN 1927

TYPES OF PUBLICATIONS	NO. IN 1883	NO. IN 1927
Daily	1,119	2,332
Tri-weekly news	45	78
Semi-weekly news	147	487
Weekly news	9,136	12,920
Fortnightly	52	109
Semi-monthly	164	300
Monthly	1,174	3,709
Bi-monthly	29	184
Quarterly	93	438
Miscellaneous	7	137
Total	11,966	20,694

* Data compiled from Newspaper Annual and Directory for 1884, p. 7, and for 1928, p. 13.

Facts concerning the number of different copies of newspapers and periodicals issued are even more significant. Judd (62)¹ presented data which show that from 1850 to 1880 the percentage of increase in the number of copies of newspapers and periodicals printed in the United States paralleled closely the percentage of increase in the population. From 1880 to 1910, however, the number of copies increased more than 500 per cent. During the same period the increase in population was less than 100 per cent.

Evidence from many sources shows clearly that interest in newspapers and magazine reading has continued to increase rapidly during recent years. For example, Stone (112) points out that in 1921 the morning newspapers in this country had a daily circulation of 10,144,260

¹The numbers in parentheses refer to the references in the bibliography. In case two numbers appear, as in (30:6), the second number indicates the page on which the data referred to appear.

copies and in 1925 a daily circulation of 12,365,215, which represents an increase of almost 22 per cent in four years. During the same period, evening papers increased from 18,279,480 to 20,634,222, which is an increase of almost 13 per cent. The population of the country increased about 6 per cent from 1921 to 1925. It is apparent, therefore, that an increasing percentage of the people read the daily newspaper. Even more striking data are presented in an editorial of the *New Republic* which show that "in 1921, the combined circulation of all New York and Brooklyn newspapers was 3,714,495. The population of Greater New York was then 5,796,133. On the first of April, 1927, the combined circulation of all newspapers in the city was 5,166,409. The population in the last year available, 1926, was, according to a careful estimate, 5,924,139. In other words, there was a gain in newspaper circulation of 1,451,914, and a population growth of only 128,006" (30:6).

Similar data are available which show that magazines have also increased in circulation very rapidly during recent years. In many centers, the chief problem is no longer to stimulate interest in reading newspapers and periodicals, but rather to develop a more critical attitude toward the material read and an interest in a higher quality of reading material. The reality of this problem is indicated by the fact that in Greater New York the daily circulation of tabloids increased between 1921 and 1927 from 1,597,091 while the standard sized newspaper lost 175,000 (30:6).

INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF BOOKS PUBLISHED AND READ

Data concerning interest in books is as significant as those concerning interest in newspapers and magazines. Table II (31:245) which is based on records in *The Pub-*

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lishers' Weekly, shows the number of new books and new editions published during each of several years since 1900.

TABLE II
NUMBER OF NEW BOOKS AND NEW EDITIONS PUBLISHED AT INTERVALS
SINCE 1900

DATE	NEW BOOKS	NEW EDITIONS	TOTAL
1900	4,490	1,866	6,356
1903	5,485	2,348	7,833
1909	10,193	708	10,901
1912	10,135	768	10,903
1915	8,349	1,385	9,734
1921	5,438	1,008	6,446
1924	6,380	1,158	7,538
1927	7,450	1,449	8,899

The striking fact revealed by the table is that the number of new books published yearly reached a peak in 1912. Although there has been a gradual increase since 1921, the number published in 1927 was much smaller than in either 1912 or 1915. The fact should be pointed out, however, that the number of books sold, and not simply the new titles published, indicates the extent of interest in books. "The only approach to such statistics available is that of the Government's manufacturing census which indicates an increase of books in the six years between 1919 and 1925 of about 100,000,000" (31:244).

Statistics relative to the circulation of library books supply additional evidence of rapid growth in interest in books. For example, Parsons (91) studied the facts for Chicago and found that in 1880 the population of that city was 503,298, and the public library circulation was 306,751. In 1920, the population was 2,701,705, and the library circulation was 7,651,928. As compared with 1880, the population had increased at least five times and the library circulation about twenty-five times. Data secured