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Reading in the Digital Age
(Läsning i den digatala tiden)

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“I used to write
I used to write letters
I used to sign my name
I used to sleep at night
Before the flashing lights settled deep in my brain”
—Arcade Fire, *We Used to Wait*

“There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.” —Joseph Brodsky

“The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read.” —Mark Twain

“So please, oh PLEASE, we beg, we pray, Go throw your TV set away, And in its place you can install, A lovely bookshelf on the wall.” —Roald Dahl, from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory
Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to analyze students’ reading habits, see what benefits reading can bring to an individual, and to research what affect screen time has on reading. Through a thorough review of available literature as well as a mixed-method approach where I surveyed 52 students in grades 4, 5, 6 and interviewed parents, a librarian and teacher, I was able to better understand reading in our current “digital age”. I have concluded that reading is indeed beneficial, that it is on the decline, and that screen time is on the rise. In addition, I have found patterns that can help educators and parents support this growing imbalance, such as setting screen-time restrictions, creating a so called “book-consciousness” in the home and classroom, and encouraging library visits and a more diverse canon for students to select books from.

Key words: Book consciousness, digital age, literacy, reading, screen time,
Table of Contents

1. Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 5
2. Purpose ................................................................................................................................. 7
3. Theoretical literature review ............................................................................................ 8
   3.1. The benefits of reading for pleasure ............................................................................. 8
   3.2. Books are beneficial ....................................................................................................... 9
   3.3. Reading on-line vs. reading paper texts ...................................................................... 10
   3.4. A decrease in reading .................................................................................................. 12
   3.5. An increase in screen time ......................................................................................... 12
   3.6. Sweden and the digital landscape .............................................................................. 13
   3.7 More problems in the digital landscape ...................................................................... 14
4. Method ................................................................................................................................ 15
5. Results, analysis and theoretical interpretation ............................................................... 18
   5.1. Results of surveys ........................................................................................................ 18
   5.1.1. Reading .................................................................................................................... 18
   5.1.2. Screen time usage ................................................................................................. 19
   5.3 Interview with Parents .................................................................................................. 22
   5.3.1. Reading at home ..................................................................................................... 23
   5.3.2. Encouraging Reading ............................................................................................. 24
   5.3.3. Restrictions and Awareness .................................................................................. 25
   5.4 Interview with school librarian .................................................................................... 27
   5.5. Interview with Parent/Teacher ................................................................................... 28
6. Conclusion and discussion ................................................................................................. 31
7. References .......................................................................................................................... 34
Appendix I: Student Survey ................................................................................................. 36
Appendix II: Interview Questions ......................................................................................... 37
1. Introduction

In the twelve years that I have been teaching, I have seen a dramatic shift in technology take hold of my students. I’ve taught English at the Bilingual Montessori School of Lund, working with students from grades F-7, and each year it seems as if there is a distinct progression in the technology that is, literally, in their hands. When I first started teaching, it was the rare student who had a mobile phone; iPhones, iPads and YouTube were yet to be invented; and computers held a fraction of the power of the devices in everyone’s pockets today.

Now, almost before we educators, parents or students have realized what has happened, smartphones are ubiquitous in every classroom, iPads are oft-heralded as the next great teaching tool, and students enjoy YouTube as their favorite diversionary medium.

I have written this paper and done my analysis not to lament this new and seemingly irreversible digital-age, but rather to try and understand it. As our schools and society have rushed to embrace it, as it has overwhelmed us like a tidal wave, I do not feel like we have asked enough important questions as to its benefits and disadvantages, especially in relation to young people and learning.

In this paper, I have sought to see how reading is affected by the digital age. Call me old-fashioned, but I see enormous benefits in having students read. Reading, as I have always assumed, not only aids their literacy, learning, but also their understanding of our worlds and cultures. I am not alone, as I will show in my paper, for there is plenty of evidence which extols the virtues of reading; reading that does not just take place in the classroom, but during students’ free time, which I will identify here as reading for pleasure.

Interestingly enough, some major tech proponents or founders of our new technology themselves see cause for concern regarding technology and young people. A reporter for The New York Times, Nick Bilton, interviewed a number of technology executives in Silicon Valley and was surprised to discover that their children had strict limitations on screen time. He found that one
of the founders of Twitter and Blogger didn’t allow his children to use iPads at all, and instead had a library of “hundreds of books, yes, physical ones, that they can pick up and read anytime.” (Bilton, 2014) In addition, both Steve Jobs and Jonathan Ive, Apple Computers two most important figures and the progenitors of the iPhone and iPad, limited their children’s screen time usage. In 2010 Steve Jobs was asked by Bilton if his kids loved the iPad that had just come out, and he replied: “They haven’t used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home.” (Bilton, 2014)

Even U.S. President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle Obama have weighed in on the debate explaining—in a quote that I often cite to my incredulous students—that their daughters are only allowed to use the computers or mobile phones for school work during the school week, and are limited to an hour per day during the weekend.

Parents and teachers are facing a high-speed technological world that, in most cases, children understand better than us. It is incumbent upon parents and teachers to understand this world and pose critical questions, or else we run the risk of not fulfilling the role of supportive guides or mentors which is at the very heart of our duties.

Specifically, one of my chief concerns with increased screen time usage is that students’ time spent reading outside of school will plummet. Indeed some numbers indicate that students are reading less, and one could assume that with increased screen usage, and a plethora of options for entertainment, students are closing their books to open their apps.
2. Purpose
The purpose of my paper is to try to get a better understanding of this new “digital age” that educators and parents face. As a teacher, I am interested in knowing what affect the proliferation of screen time has on my students. It is not enough for me merely to dismiss it as a mindless activity—for better or worse it appears that tablets, smart phones and computers are ubiquitous and will continue to be so for the indefinite future.

In the context of our all-encroaching digital age, the main questions that I hope to have a better understanding of are: Is reading truly as beneficial an alternative to computers as we may assume? Does screen time indeed pose a threat to young people’s reading time? And, if so, what are some ways for teachers and parents to encourage reading and ensure that young people are not overwhelmed by a digital tidal wave?

I will analyze these questions carefully while reviewing literature on the subject and conducting my own mixed method of quantitative and qualitative research. By the end of this paper I hope that this daunting digital future appears a little clearer.
3. Theoretical literature review

To advance my understanding of how the digital age affects students’ reading for pleasure, I have studied a number of scholarly articles and books on the subject and used the authors’ research and conclusions to help inform my understanding.

There is a wide-range of literature surveying my areas of study: books and articles that focus on the benefits of reading for pleasure, the decline in students’ reading for pleasure, literacy in general and the increase in students’ screen time.

I’ve chosen to focus on these areas to see, first of all, if what I have always assumed is indeed correct: that reading is good for you. Secondly, I have looked at recent research showing that students reading time has decreased. Finally, by linking that reading to students’ increased use of screen time, I believe we can make the correlation that the beneficial practice of reading for pleasure is on the decline likely as a result of increased screen time.

3.1. The benefits of reading for pleasure

To set the stage, I think it is important to see what recent research says about the benefits of reading for pleasure. Unsurprisingly, at least in the reading I have reviewed, it is unanimously positive: research from multiple countries and continents, school districts and national educational institutes, praise the virtues of reading for pleasure. Among a few highlights of my reading include:

- A report from the OECD found that reading for pleasure has been reported as more important for children’s educational success than their family’s socio-economic status (OECD, 2002)
- Neurologists writing in the journal Brain Connectivity have performed research which shows that people who read fiction show increased brain connectivity and function. (Berns, Blaine, Prietula, & Pye, 2013)
- The Linguist Stephen A Krashen argues in his research that:
When children read for pleasure, when they get “hooked on books”, they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called “language skills” many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level. Without it, I suspect that children simply do not have a chance. (Krashen, 1993, p. 85)

- A research report from New Zealand, “The Growing Independence report on the Competent Learners project for children at age 14”, has similarly found that students “who love reading:
  - had higher scores on the cognitive and social/attitudinal competencies
  - had consistently higher scores in mathematics, reading, logical problem-solving and attitude
  - had higher average scores for engagement in school, positive communication and relations with family, and positive friendships
  - showed less risky behaviour
  - had higher levels of motivation towards school

Those who did not enjoy reading were more likely to:
  - be heavier television watchers over time
  - have had bullying experiences
  - to be seen by teachers as having difficult classroom behaviour at age 12
  - be less likely to complete their homework
  - be less likely to be enthusiastic about going to school (Education N. Z., 2006)

- And finally, researchers from the New School in New York have also found a correlation between reading literary fiction and increased empathy. (Comer Kidd & Castano, 2013)

Indeed it was not hard for me to find a plethora of research on the benefits of reading, the challenge was in limiting the examples. It is safe to say that it appears that there is a clear consensus: reading is good for you.

3.2. Books are beneficial
A recent study analyzing academic performance found that, after G.N.P., the quantity of books in one’s home was the most important predictor of reading performance, and that families with
libraries of at least 100 books see children benefit from an extra 1.5 years of grade-level reading performance (Evans, Kelley, & Sikora, 2014).

I was not surprised to discover that this does not just apply to homes either, but that a review of findings of school library research points to clear benefits in academic achievement and literacy for students (Gretes, 2013). This is certainly important, considering students’ varying socio-economic backgrounds and access to books, and it shows that a school library has the potential to be an equalizing force in a child’s academic success.

3.3. Reading on-line vs. reading paper texts

Since I am exploring reading and our digital age, I would be amiss if I did not look at the intersection of the two areas I am studying: the differences between reading a book printed on paper and reading a book on a screen. As reading on a device has become an accepted way of reading in schools and for pleasure, I was interested in seeing what research has been conducted comparing the two ways of reading.

A study by Scholastic found that “the percentage of children who have read an ebook has increased across all age groups since 2010 (25% vs. 61%)” (Scholastic, 2015, p. 64), and although this same research indicates that the majority of children who have read an ebook say most of the books they read are in print (77%) (Scholastic, 2015, p. 67), there is little doubt that the proliferation of ebook options, both on a tablet and smart phone, give young readers a greater selection of platforms to choose from.

Is this optimal? Is there any difference between reading a printed page and reading from a screen? At least a couple of researchers believe there is. In an article by P. Karen Murphy and Theresa A. Holleran, the authors’ research team devised a study where 131 undergraduate students read two magazine articles. Before reading the articles, the students were randomly placed in to one of three groups approximately equal in size: one group read the articles in traditional text form and responded to questionnaires on paper; a second group read the articles from a web page and then answered the questionnaires on paper; and a final group both read the articles and answered questions in a computerized on-line format. The results “revealed that regardless of the group, all students increased their knowledge about the article topics”, however
“students in the paper group found the texts to be much more understandable than respondents who read the texts in a computerized form, regardless of whether they to the questions on paper or computer.” (Holleran & Murphy, 2004, p. 135) According to the researchers, the students in the traditional paper reading group also found the article to be more interesting and the author more credible. (Holleran & Murphy, 2004, p. 136)

The authors of the study concluded that:

given that there is such an emphasis on using computers in the classroom, this study gives educators reason to pause and examine the alleged benefits associated with computer use in the classroom. Simply put, the results of this study suggest that students find paper texts easier to understand and somewhat more convincing. If anything, the study results suggest that computerized texts may even present additional hurdles for less competent readers. (Holleran & Murphy, 2004, p. 135-137)

I have looked for evidence which speaks on the possible benefits of tablets to encourage reading, but I could not find anything conclusive. However I was surprised to find two key findings from Scholastic’s report:

• While the percentage of children who have read an ebook has increased across all age groups since 2010 (25% vs. 61%), the majority of children who have read an ebook say most of the books they read are in print (77%).
• Nearly two-thirds of children (65%)—up from 2012 (60%)—agree that they’ll always want to read books in print even through there are ebooks available. (Scholastic, 2015)

I have seen students with reading-difficulties employ an audio-book function on a tablet to help them see and hear the text, but they are still involved in the reading process, their eyes still set on the written word. What could prove to be problematic is that at a certain point too much intrusion from the device, too many bells and whistles, causes the book to cease being a book and instead become entertainment. The author of the popular children’s book The Gruffalo, Julia Donaldson, is against having her book as an ebook. She says that her publishers:

showed me an ebook of Alice in Wonderland. They said, 'Look, you can press buttons and do this and that', and they showed me the page where Alice's neck gets longer. There's a button the child can press to make the neck stretch, and I thought, well, if the child's doing that, they are not going to be listening or reading. 'I wish my cat Dinah was here' or whatever it says in the text – they're just going to be fiddling with this wretched button. (Rustin, 2011)
It is interesting that an author chooses to keep her book in paper form, despite obvious financial benefits. She apparently sees that an ebook can serve as diversionary device, mooting the text’s message. I am unaware if many authors have chosen such a path, but when it comes to children’s literature, it is a question for authors, educators and parents to consider, as print books do not have the easy availability of distractions built in. With a book in paper form, readers can not effortlessly and instantaneously change apps and switch to something else or be distracted by a text or message: the focus is solely on reading, not any additional entertainment or diversion which could conceivably derail reading’s benefits.

3.4. A decrease in reading

I have made clear that many researchers see reading as a beneficial, if not an essential part of a young person’s upbringing. But are young people still reading? The data is discouraging.

According to a U.S. government study, since 1984 the proportion of American tweens and teens who read for pleasure once a week or more has dropped from 81% to 76% among 9-year-olds, from 70% to 53% among 13-year-olds, and from 64% to 40% among 17-year-olds. The proportion who say they “never” or “hardly ever” read has gone from 8% of 13-year-olds and 9% of 17-year-olds in 1984 to 22% and 27% respectively today. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013)

3.5. An increase in screen time

So if students are not reading as much as they used to, what are they doing with their time? The correlation that I make—and that I later try to show through my own survey of my students—is that the proliferation of digital media is the cause of a decrease in reading.

A recent report by the Common Sense Media foundation, shows alarming statistics for young people’s media usage. Their surveys showed that American tweens (children between the ages of 8-12) use media, excluding time spent for school or homework, for an average of 5.55 hours a day, 4.36 hours of which is screen time. The numbers for American teens is even higher, with 8.56 average media hours spent a day, 6.40 hours of which is screen time, again unrelated to any school work. (Common Sense Media, 2015)
Given such a cornucopia of easy and accesibly hand-held and often unsupervised media options, it is no wonder that reading has been edged out in the competition for children’s free time and reading numbers have dwindled drastically amongst young people.

3.6. Sweden and the digital landscape

Although much of the reading and research on the matter exists outside of Sweden, I would still like to connect the digital phenomenon to the country I teach in, Sweden. The OECD report *Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection, PISA*, indicates that computer usage among students is high in Sweden (OECD, 2015). According to the report “In 2012, students in OECD countries typically spent over 2 hours online each day. Students who spend more than 6 hours per day online outside of school, are more likely to report that they feel lonely at school, arrive late or skip days of school.” Swedish 15 year olds, the age the report focuses on, in 2012 spent the most amount of time on weekdays on average on the internet of all OECD countries, at 144 minutes a day. Swedish 15 year-olds are also third in weekend internet usage (176 minutes a day, behind Macao-China and Denmark, 178 and 177 minutes respectively), and only trail Russia (13.7% of 15 year olds compared to Sweden’s 13.2%) among all OECD countries in “extreme internet-usage” (over 6 hours a day). (OECD, 2015, p. 19)

Sweden has also invested heavily in computers at school ranking 7th in 2012 among OECD countries in percentage of 15-year olds using computers at school (87%), despite the report’s findings that:

> Students’ exposure to computers at school varies widely between countries. However, the use of computers does not seem to be a prominent factor in explaining the variation in student performance in math, reading or science. Most countries that invested heavily in education related IT equipment did not witness an appreciable improvement in student achievement over the past 10 years. (OECD, 2015)

The strong desire for computers in Swedish schools as well as high screen time use at home has caused Swedish experts such as *specialpedagoger* (Cervin, 2012) and pediatricians (Lagercrantz, 2013) to question their efficacy, and even if they are doing more harm than good.
Finally, as indicated by a recent report analyzing Swedish students’ media usage, it appears that Swedish students may be aware themselves that they are using screens too much and reading too little:

- 41% of Swedish 9-12 year olds feel as if they do not have enough time to read books or newspapers—up from 36% in 2012/13
- 49% of 13-16 year olds (up from 42% in 2012/13) do not feel like they have ample time to read
- and 54% of 17-18 year olds (as opposed to 44% in 2012/13) likewise feel like they do not have enough reading time. (Statens medieråd, 2015, p. 12)

The students’ analysis of their reading time is accurate as, according to the report:

- 30% of 9-12 year olds in Sweden read every day, yet 65% of them use the internet daily and 59% of them watch tv-programs every day
- only 19% of 13-16 year olds read daily, while 95% of them use the internet each day, 26% of them play videogames each day and 42% consume tv-programs daily
- and finally, just 13% of 17-18 year olds in Sweden are daily readers, yet 95% of them they use the internet each day, 33% watch television every day and 17% play video games each day. (Statens medieråd, 2015, p. 23)

These numbers clearly show that young people’s reading in Sweden, despite its educational and social value, pales in comparison to screen time.

3.7 More problems in the digital landscape

A 1999 study in the journal *Pediatrics* documented how young people’s sleep and school performance are adversely affected by the presence of a television in their bedroom. (Owens J, 1999) Now, with the proliferation of screens in every corner, one can only imagine how sleep, and schoolwork suffers.

In addition, a recent study worked with a group of preteens outside, away from their screens at a camp for 5 days, and contrasted them with a control group. The children who spent time away from their usual habits of texting, surfing and gaming, showed greater emotional understanding of one another. (Uhls, Michikyan, & Morris, October 2014, Vol. 39)
4. Method

I chose a mixed-method approach, employing both quantitative and qualitative research. John W. Creswell in his book, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Method Approaches*, identifies the specific mixed-method approach that I used as a “sequential procedure” stating that “the study may begin with a quantitative method in which theories or concepts are tested, to be followed by a qualitative method involving detailed exploration with a few cases or individuals.” (Creswell, 2003, p. 16)

In my quantitative research, I sought first to test a hypothesis: do students who do not have screen time restrictions at home read less and use screens more than students who do have screen time restrictions? Then, upon compiling my data, I conducted interviews with specific individuals so I could expand upon the numbers and have a more nuanced perspective. I feel that it would not have been enough just for me to survey my students and assume that the numbers and results I received give me the whole story. My interviews, coupled with that quantitative experience, allows my research, in my opinion, to be more well-rounded and informative.

My quantitative research was conducted in October 2015 at my school, the Bilingual Montessori School of Lund and it consisted of having my 52 students in the 4th, 5th and 6th grades answer questions in a survey about their reading time.

On the survey my students were asked to:

- check a box estimating how much time they read on an average weekday outside of school (0 minutes, 1-15 minutes, 16-30 minutes, 31-45 minutes, 46-60 minutes or over 60 minutes)
- check a box estimating how much screen time (signified as TV, tablet, computer or smartphone) they had on an average weekday outside of school (0 minutes, 1-15 minutes, 16-30 minutes, 31-45 minutes, 46-60 minutes or over 60 minutes)
- indicate (yes or no) if they had any screen time restrictions from their parents or guardians at home
- and finally, if they did have any screen time restrictions, they were asked to explain what those restrictions are. (This final, more qualitative portion was used to ensure that any screen time restrictions the indicated were actually restrictions, i.e. if a child had written,
for example, that they could only play 5 hours a day of video games, I did not consider this to be a restriction.)

The students and the students’ parents/guardians were informed of the work that I was doing, that all information collected would be anonymous, and that they could choose to remove their child from the data if they so desired. No one requested to have their information removed.

After collecting the data from the students, I sorted the information about reading time and screen time into 4 groupings:

- students who read or had screen time for 0 minutes a day were classified as “No Time” users/readers
- students who read or had screen time for 1-15 minutes a day were classified as “Low” users/readers
- students who read or had screen time for 16-45 minutes a day were classified as “Medium” users/readers
- and students who read or had screen time for over 45 minutes a day were classified as “High” users/readers

31 of my students answered that they had no screen time restrictions at home, 21 answered that they do have screen time restrictions at home. In the charts below, according to their information that they submitted, I show how these students, with and without screen time restrictions, read and used screens on an average school day.

My qualitative research was conducted between October and November 2015 and involved interviewing parents of students at my school, my school’s librarian and a teacher/parent from the United States. For my interviews I asked different questions of the school librarian and American teacher/parent than I asked of the parents, whom were all interviewed with the same set of questions. However, in each interview, I allowed for spontaneous questions or follow-up questions to arise during the conversation.

In *Qualitative Quality: Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research* the author Sarah J. Tracy argues that “qualitative researchers should simultaneously avoid a public atmosphere that favors broad quantitative studies but also strategically design ways to respond and act within […] such an environment.” (Tracy, 2010, p. 838) She advocates using eight criteria: A worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical and meaningful coherence—and suggests that by doing this a “simple structure of
qualitative methodological best practices can therefore encourage dialogue with members of the scientific, experimental and quantitative communities.” (Tracy, 2010)

A problem about my approach that I have considered is the reliability of the survey and the interviewees. I relied on the honesty and estimations of my students on their surveys. I could certainly imagine that a few of them might have wanted to impress their teacher and indicate that they read more than they actually do. Also, by asking them to estimate their daily screen time/reading time, I am demanding that the students quickly calculate something that could vary a great deal per day. It is therefore that I asked in my instructions, both written and verbal, that they consider an “average school day”. To get more reliable results, I could have asked my students to keep a screen time/reading log over a week, although, in all likelihood, fewer children would have returned their logs and it would prove more troublesome for them to comply with such a log than a simple, in-class survey. Some similar issues could, of course, be present in my interviews, as parents could conceivably want to give a better impression than the reality. The very nature of observation can change results, but I hope that in the instances of my quantitative and qualitative research, I have garnered enough data and information to give a relative approximation of this situation.

By a mixed-method approach, it was my hope to see patterns in the students reading at home and the correlation between any restrictions of computer usage and how much they read, and then to take that data and get a closer, more personal, understanding of it.
5. Results, analysis and theoretical interpretation

5.1. Results of surveys

5.1.1. Reading

According to the data I collected with my students (Grades 4-5-6, 52 students in total), students who have restrictions on their screen time at home, were 65% more likely to be “medium” or “high” use readers—classified as 31-60+ minutes (graphs 1 and 2).

84% of Students who had no screen time restrictions were in the two low reading categories (graph 1), while my findings discovered that only 19% of the students who do have screen time restrictions were in these same low categories (graph 2).

On the other hand only 16% of students with no restrictions are medium/high readers (31-60+ minutes) as opposed to 81% medium/high readers of students with restrictions (graphs 1 and 2). Only 10% of the students who had no restrictions were high readers (over 60 minutes a day) whereas 38% of the students who had restrictions read for more than 60 minutes a day (graphs 1 and 2).

Finally, regarding non-readers, 10% of students without screen time restrictions don’t read at all (graph 1), whereas none of the students who do have screen time restrictions read for 0 minutes a day (graph 2).

As a great deal of literature on the subject shows how students who read have greater academic and social success (including OECD, 2002 and Education N. Z., 2006), these numbers are alarming and place students who do not have restrictions, and thus do not read as much, at a significant disadvantage.
5.1.2. Screen time usage
68% of my students who had no screen time restrictions used screens for over an hour each day, while 38% of them with restrictions used screens for more than an hour (graphs 3 and 4)
These numbers mirror the research that indicate the screen time has reached increasingly high levels (Common Sense Media, 2015) and allow us to see a cause behind the research that shows us that reading is on the decline (Scholastic, 2015 and Statens medieråd, 2015).

These numbers clearly show, at least in this small sample size, how screen time restrictions at home result in significantly less screen usage. Contrasting these results with the graphs 1 and 2, one could make the correlation that less screen time results in more reading time, and students who have restrictions read more. As 84% of students without screen restrictions time read for fewer than 30 minutes a day (graph 1) and 97% of those same students are medium to high screen users, with 68% of those students using screens for over an hour a day (graph 4), I am concerned that parents are not as aware as they should be how much influence they have in supporting their children’s reading habits by instituting rules at home.

Although I feel my data reveals some interesting patterns, I still wonder exactly how much time those high-use screen time users are in front of screens daily, and were I to do the study again, I’d ask them to give a specific number instead of just limiting their answers to the 60+ minutes category. I fear, after reading the Common Sense, Scholastic and Statens medieråd studies, that many of those students could be at 120+ minutes, a good number even at the 240+ minute categories, essentially screening out any possibility to receive the reading benefits that are so valuable for them.
Graph 3:
Students' Daily Screen Time With Screen Time Restrictions (21 students)

- None (0 min.): 5%
- Low (1-30 min.): 9%
- Medium (31-60): 38%
- High (60+): 48%

Graph 4:
Students' Daily Screen Time With No Restrictions (31 students)

- Low (1-30 min.): 3%
- Medium (31-60 min.): 29%
- High (60+ min.): 68%
5.3 Interview with Parents

To relate my research to my specific work environment, I interviewed the parents of four children from my school. In the excerpts from my interview below, they are identified as L, J, K and P:

- L is the mother of a girl in the 3rd grade.
- K is the mother of two children, a boy and a girl, grades 7 and 8 respectively.
- J is the mother of a girl and boy, grades 6 and 8 respectively.
- P is the mother of three children, two girls and a boy, grades 2, 8 and 6 respectively.

I have taught 7 of their children (the youngest child of P is in a grade younger than I teach) and been a mentor for 3 of the children. As I teach and have taught multiple grades at my school, I have had some of these students in class for at most 4 years. In the event of the students in my mentor group, I have held twice yearly development talks and been the parents’ main contact regarding their child’s education since they were in the F-klass (K’s oldest daughter) or since they were in the third grade (K’s son and L’s daughter).

I chose these parents because I have observed their children to be among my students who are most interested in reading and discussing literature. One of the children, the youngest daughter of J, recently returned from a family vacation of a week and had read the entire Percy Jackson *Lightning Thief* series, in English. The children of K are eager for book suggestions, read current children’s literature and classics, and read well above their grade level. The oldest daughter of P and I would often compete, jokingly, during the school year, to see who had read more novels (she usually won, but I still contend that her books were not as long). L’s daughter, the youngest of the students I have taught, according to her mom, “hardly ever has any interest in digital media or devices. She would prefer to read.”

Perhaps, not surprisingly, all of these children are ambitious, strong students, and excellent writers. It is not my contention that reading is the sole cause of these attributes, as their parents care and attention could be seen to play as much or a greater role in their success. For issues of discretion and privacy, I steered clear from asking the parents about their personal lives and education, although I can confirm that each parent has earned a university degree and works professionally. Although I used English with them, I allowed the parents to reply to me in Swedish if they preferred, the quotes, therefore, are bilingual, original and untranslated.
My questions were geared toward the understanding of how restrictions affected children’s reading habits, and by choosing children that I knew to be strong readers, one could argue that I have slanted the research in my favor. However, Tracy argues in favor of sincerity in one’s research: “sincerity means that research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals and foibles, as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys and mistakes of the research.” (Tracy, 2010, p. 841) I need not hide the fact that I sought respondents that would lead me to a specific sub-set of answers, but at the same time, I have not edited or tailored their answers to meet my pre-assumed definitions, as I indeed I was surprised that only one of the parents had clear screen time restrictions at home. I believe that this flexibility and disclosure meets the standards of “sincerity” and “credibility” within Tracy’s guidelines.

At one point, I also considered interviewing parents whose children I knew to be poor readers or heavy users of screens. After further thought though, I realized that this could be problematic. Here, I believe that I considered Tracy’s standards of ”relational ethics” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847) in my decision not to interview these parents. In my estimation, my quantative research does enough to show how screen time affects reading; I need not make a bad example of parents or families and, as Tracy writes ”co-opt others just to get a great story.” This could be damaging to my relationship with these parents and would only only serve to set up two paradigms, when one is already implicit, that are less nuanced than necessary.

5.3.1. Reading at home
When I asked the parents if they read I received a consistent response that the parents were all themselves readers and appreciated reading.

In L’s words:

I believe kids do as we do, not as we say. Reading has always been a part of [my daughter’s] life and she has since an early age shown interest in spelling and putting letters together into words. I read a lot of books and papers at home connected to my work and I think [my daughter] finds that interesting.
P says that “I have always read a lot. I read every night when I go to bed.” According to K “I read a lot myself and talk about the books I read when I was their age and what and why I liked what I read.” and J shares that reading “har berett mig så mycket glädje och jag önskar att [her children] får uppleva det samma.”

5.3.2. Encouraging Reading

Additionally, each parent has invested time encouraging their children’s reading habits.

K says that “I have read to them since they were little and I still do sometimes.” She also actively makes the effort to seek books that she thinks will interest her children:

I try to find good books that I think they will like, both classical ones that my husband and I read, and more recent ones that they have heard about through school or friends. The latter strategy has been more successful (the Percy Jackson, Troubletwisters, and Maze Runner series). Attempts to make them read books by classical authors, such as Mark Twain, Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas, L.M. Montogmery, L. M. Alcott) have had a more limited success. Some of these have worked when I read them to the kids, but I have not been able to make them read them on their own.

J has made it a daily effort with her children to involve them in literature:


P has read to her children and encouraged their learning, and even sometimes used coercion to get them to read:

We started reading to them when they were only 8-9 months old so books have always been a part of their lives. They have all started to read by themselves around the age of 5, but we have continued reading for them longer. To encourage them to read can be different things. Sometimes it is just helping them find the right book and then they do the rest. Sometimes it has to be compulsory. For example: reading time gives screen time. Sometimes we bribe them by giving 50 kr. for a 1000 read pages.

P continues to explain why she puts in the effort to ensure that her children are readers

I think that it [reading] is very important for many reasons. I want them to see the joy of reading, to feel that it is a way to calm down and to leave your own worries for a while. You also learn a
lot from it. It helps them see things from other perspectives. They also need to be good readers to be able to learn, for example, when reading their schoolbooks. It is hard to learn from a text if your reading isn’t fluent.

These parents have grasped, consciously or unconsciously, what my research on the subject has confirmed: that reading pays dividends academically and socially. Looking back over my interviews now, I would have liked to ask them where they base their assumptions on reading’s benefits. However, it is safe to say that their efforts have clear benefits for the children, as researchers (OECD, 2002), linguists (Krashen, 1993), neurologists (Berns, Blaine, Prietula, & Pye, 2013) and school boards (Education N. Z., 2006) have all indicated that children who read receive numerous and significant benefits.

5.3.3. Restrictions and Awareness

Before interviewing the parents, I had assumed that each child would have specific restrictions discouraging screen time. I was therefore surprised to learn, however, that only 1 of the 4 parents I interviewed institute a screen time restriction. However, as became evident in my interviews, all the parents are what I would call “screen time conscious”—that is, they are aware of their child’s habits and know when to say enough time spent in front of a screen is enough.

J explains her family’s perspective towards screen time:


K explains her strategy balancing screen time consciousness with coercion:

There is a delicate balance between forcing too much that may result in a negative attitude towards reading and letting them get away with no reading. A measure of coercion worked when they were younger and still does to a certain extent. If they know they don’t have a choice they will more easily settle down to read for 30 minutes. If they are forced to read for at least 30 minutes, there is a greater chance that they will get into the book and then continue of their own
free will. We have seen many examples of that. There have even been cases when they have preferred to read rather than watch a movie because they have been into a really good book.

L explained to me that there has never been any need for restrictions as her daughter has always preferred reading.

The only parent who had screen time rules at home, P, explains her family’s rules:

We have had the rule that it’s half an hour on school nights and 1 hour on weekends for computer/phone/ipad. We did that because we don’t want a screen to be the first choice every time. We like them to find other things to do. It is harder now when they are older since that is the way they communicate with their friends. They have to place phone/iPad in the kitchen when they go to bed so that they don’t use it when they are supposed to sleep. We haven’t had so much trouble with this. Our kids have a lot of sports activities so they don’t really have time to spend too much time in front of a screen.

These parents’ screen-consciousness and reading-encouragement seem to play a greater role in their children’s reading habits than any imposed restrictions. However, as these parents have all had their children B.i.P. (before iPad), it would be interesting to interview a new set of parents again in 5-10 years to see what challenges they contend with to get their children to read, as it is now common to see children under 2 passing numerous hours on tablets or smartphones, and, as data has shown (OECD, 2015) Sweden is saturated with computers and tablets at schools.

Although I asked the parents about their own reading habits, and all of them confirmed that they enjoyed reading, I wish I had taken the opportunity to inquire if they have a library of books in their home, as my reading points to home libraries having a most important impact on academic achievement. (Evans, Kelley, & Sikora, 2014)

Referring back to my readings, specifically, “The Growing Independence report on the Competent Learners project for children at age 14” (Education N. Z., 2006), my observations of the children of the interviewees is that they are, without exception, strong students both academically and socially, something that the researchers suggest is a benefit of reading. The parents that I interviewed all mentioned that they read to their children and worked actively to encourage reading in their lives. This parental involvement, this book-consciousness, is undoubtedly a key-factor in their children’s success.
5.4 Interview with school librarian

I have always assumed that school libraries have great value, and I have heard numerous comments about their worth, but I thought it would be useful to explore the role of a school library in this digital age. In my research I learned that a school library is a legal right for all students in Sweden, Skollagen (2010:800), and, as I mention in my literature study, a home library of books greatly benefits students’ academic achievement (Evans, Kelley, & Sikora, 2014), and a school library likewise aids academic achievement (Gretes, 2013). However, I wanted to take my research a little more local so I chose to interview my school’s librarian about her role, the importance of reading, and how the digital landscape affects her profession. “A” works as a school librarian twice a week at BMSL, serving students from the f-klass to the 9th grade.

A sees her role as an important one:

Skolbibliotekarien har en viktig roll i att skapa lust att läsa genom att hitta rätt bok för rätt elev. Men också att bidra till elevens läsutveckling genom att hitta böcker på rätt nivå. Detta är särskilt viktigt för de yngre barnen. Skolbibliotekarien har också en viktig roll i att stödja lärarna i det pedagogiska arbetet genom att hitta lämpliga böcker i skolans olika ämnen. Skolbibliotekarien kan också bidra till lusten att läsa genom att ordna olika aktiviteter, t.ex i anslutning till Poesidage, internationella läsdagen, Kura Skymning osv.

She also sees enormous benefits in reading:

Att läsa böcker, särskilt skönlitterära böcker, ger som ingen annan källa en viktig kunskap till vad det innebär att vara människa. I böckerna möter man alla möjliga världar, berättelser, människor. Man lär sig om relationer, om andra människors känslor, man utvecklar sin empatiska förmåga. Man utvecklar sin fantasi och kreativitet. Man blir helt enkelt en bättre människa av att läsa.

She also acknowledges how the new digital landscape is encroaching on reading:


In interviewing A, I was pleased to learn, from her experience, that she believes that reading builds empathy, as my reading had suggested (Comer Kidd & Castano, 2013). I learned that building a school library is not just a matter of choosing books and putting them on shelves, but rather it involves engaging children in literature. In that regard, she shares something in common
with the parents that I interviewed: that she values books, that she consciously tries to engage students in literature, and that she understands their significance in our new digital world and actively works to promote books as a healthy alternative to screen time.

A school library has the opportunity to be an equalizing force in student’s lives. Even if they lack parents who have books in the home or who are book-conscious, the fact that Sweden requires schools to have a school library gives students with a multiplicity of backgrounds and socioeconomic conditions an opportunity to read. The more active a school librarian is and the more active teachers are in encouraging library usage, the more students are likely to gain from becoming readers. I feel fortunate that the librarian at my school engages the students and works actively with us to have special days promoting literature. A school and a school library can thus fill roles that could be absent at home.

5.5. Interview with Parent/Teacher

The final interview that I conducted was with a retired middle school and high school English teacher who taught in the United States.

N retired in 2005 after teaching for 35 years saw the benefit of encouraging her students’ interest in reading:

> It was a goal for me as a teacher to get my students to read. I always had a classroom library. I always sought out books that would interest them at used bookstores or garage sales. I had a collection of bookmarks that they could pick out. I made them do book reports, as many as two per quarter. I gave them time to read at the beginning of class.

Teaching in a multicultural school district, where the majority of students were not white, she looked outside of the canon to interest her students in reading:

> I was involved in a program where I sought out multicultural literature. I even got funding from my district where I could explore different titles and shared them with my students. Most of my students weren’t white males like in the classic canon of literature. Our school district was primarily Latino, Chinese, and Pilipino, and I actively sought books that represented and reflected these children’s lives. I remember a few of them remarking to me that they had never read books that portrayed their families or their
experiences before, and I was happy, I was hopeful that they could see how wide the scope of literature could be. That it included them too.

She saw, with regret, how reading became deprioritized. Her school, not fair from California’s Silicon Valley, got caught up in the 90’s hysteria of computers:

The high school that I worked at had a policy, which unfortunately they dropped, they had a reading period each day of 20 minutes for all students, but they don’t do that anymore. I remember when PowerPoints first came around, there was a demand from the administration that we teach the students how to do PowerPoints or other computer functions, and things like the reading period were discontinued.

Over her 35 years of teaching, she saw a shift in reading habits:

It became more difficult to get students to read over time. I don’t teach today, I have friends who today lament students constantly trying to check their phones, or their short attention span, yet in my time I remember how we had to contend with television, how cable-TV was becoming prominent. I remember how during a conversation one time with one of my classes, they were shocked that I had only one television. Most of them had one in their bedroom, 4 or 5 in the house. When I asked if they had many books, they generally replied that they did not.

The experiences of this teacher echo the experiences of the parents and the librarian I interviewed. Like them, she had an ingrained book-consciousness, and awareness that reading was fundamental for her students.

I found her story on TV as a distraction interesting. It provides a real-life anecdote which relates well to the research done by Owens which shows how TVs in the bedroom can disrupt a child’s learning (Owens J, 1999). To relate it to Owens’ study, I looked for some quantitative research that sought to measure students’ awareness in class based on their evening screen time usage, but I was not able to find any such research. However, my own surveys with my students clearly show that reading is affected by screen time.

I also found this teacher’s role as a sort of ”classroom librarian” telling. She saw promoting books as one of her most important duties as a teacher. By collecting a library of books, by seeking diverse titles, and by setting aside time each day for her students to read, she helped to establish and encourage reading’s central role in her student’s learning. She shares similarities,
in these regards, with both the librarian at my school and with the parents I interviewed, in seeking unique ways to encourage reading.

I think that it would be very interesting to conduct even more interviews with teachers, parents and librarians on how they encourage reading, especially with students from multicultural backgrounds. The parents that I interviewed come from relatively similar backgrounds—i.e. white, financially stable and with degrees from higher education institutions—and do not provide the most nuanced representations of all students’ home reading experiences. I would be curious to know how teachers and librarians in Sweden today are encouraging reading to students of different backgrounds and ensuring that all students feel represented by the literature that they read.
6. Conclusion and discussion

All appearances indicate that we have entered a digital age where more people are glued to their phones or their series, than to a novel; where writing letters has become an anachronistic relic; where seeing our “friends” on-line is more common than meeting our friends in person; and where sending texts littered with abbreviated language and emojis to express emotion is the norm. No matter if you see this as progress or a step backwards, it is essential that we take the time to consider the changes our acceptance of all things digital evokes, in our lives, in our learning and in our schools.

One possible hazard that I see before us, and that I feel that this paper has studied and analyzed, is the danger that the digital age presents for reading, specifically for young people. We have seen that they are reading less, and using screens more, despite the clear benefits that come with reading. Schools, long an environment that encourages reading, have become a peddler, and accomplice in this digital age, with Sweden ranking as one of the most digitized countries at school and at home (OECD 2015). There could be many benefits to increased computer usage, but not if it costs us our literacy.

I was overwhelmed by the literature and research that I read that pointed to reading’s great benefits for young people and all people. For fear of becoming redundant and repetitive, I left out a plethora of material and studies that confirmed my assumptions. Be it students’ educational success (OECD 2002) and (Evans, Kelley, & Sikora, 2014), their brain connectivity (Berns, Blaine, Prietula, & Pye, 2013), their mental well-being and empathy (Comer Kidd & Castano, 2013) or their academic and social skills (Education N. Z., 2006), reading is proven to be essential. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I could not find a single paper or any research that suggested that reading was not of the utmost importance in students’ lives. On the other hand, many of the articles and books that I read, contained both empirical data and anecdotal observations that too much screen-time was damaging for young people (among them, Uhls, Michikyan, & Morris, October 2014, Vol. 39).

My own quantitative data that I conducted at my school, showing the differences in reading and screen time usage amongst students with and without restrictions, caused me great concern. That only 21 of my 52 parents imposes restrictions on screen time, despite the clear evidence that
screen time inhibits reading, is alarming. I have seen how it affects them, the stark number that students with restrictions were 65% more likely to be “medium” or “high” use daily readers (classified as 31-60+ minutes). If reading is so important, as my reading indicates, students whose parents do not impose some sort of control over or awareness of their child’s habits are putting their children at a disadvantage.

Yet encouraging reading is not just about restrictions, as my qualitative research has shown. It is significantly more nuanced. As a parent, as my interviews have shown, it involves encouraging reading, having book-consciousness, reading to your child, and in the case of my school librarian and the teacher I interviewed, it is important to seek books that reach all children and make reading a lively, essential, and important part of children’s lives if we are to contend with the exciting attraction of screens.

What parents can do, what teachers can do, is to understand this shifting landscape and to consciously make decisions about what is best for their child, their students. It is not getting any easier: virtual reality is making great advancements, someday there will be an iPhone 50, it seems as if there is no limit to where technology can go, while at the same time the printed page remains the same as it always has, an alchemy of letters, words, sentences and punctuation typed across a page, hoping to make a connection, educate, build insight, but needing readers.

Parents and teachers who do show an awareness towards this new reality can ensure that there is a healthy balance, and can make sure that books continue to give their benefit long into the future.

The ubiquity of technology and its constant encroachment into our private lives, let alone our education system, requires that we critically analyze these issues and develop plans, guidelines and systems that ensure that students are not just, so to speak, left to their devices. As more and more research indicates that too much technology affects children adversely, and as we see reading time, with all its clear benefits, plummet, school administrators and teachers must be forward thinking in supporting all students. One of my concerns is that children in different socio-economic conditions could be more vulnerable to unsupervised overindulgence of screen time and thus lose literacy’s essential benefits. There is the potential for class-chasms to be
created if we do not pay attention. As my interviews and research indicated, parental involvement, a so-called “book consciousness” greatly supports an interest in reading and a screen time balance. I grow concerned that Skolverket, school administrators, or teacher-training colleges in Sweden are not more actively discussing this present future. By reading more material on the matter and by conducting my own research, I feel significantly more prepared to engage in this discussion, and I hope that this paper represents one of many enquiries into this most essential conversation on our young people’s future.
7. References


Appendix I: Student Survey

Name: ______________________

Reading and Screen Time

How many hours a day do you read outside of school?

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<th>0 minutes</th>
<th>1-15 minutes</th>
<th>16-30 minutes</th>
<th>31-45 minutes</th>
<th>46-60 minutes</th>
<th>60+ minutes</th>
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How many hours are you in front of a screen outside of school? (TV, iPad, computer, smart phone, etc.)

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<th>0 minutes</th>
<th>1-15 minutes</th>
<th>16-30 minutes</th>
<th>31-45 minutes</th>
<th>46-60 minutes</th>
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Do you have any “screen time” restrictions at home?

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If yes, please describe your “screen time” restrictions at home?


Appendix II: Interview Questions

Starting Questions for Parents:
Do you feel that reading is important for your children? Why?

In what ways, if at all, have you encouraged their reading?

(For parents with a son and daughter) Have you encouraged their reading in any different ways due to their gender? Have you found it more or less of a challenge to encourage your son or your daughter to read?

Do you read yourself?

Do your children have any so called “screen time” restrictions (computer, tv, smart phone, etc.)? If so, can you explain what they are and why you decided to impose them?

Starting Questions for Librarian:
What value do you think a librarian has at a school?

How do you encourage students at BMSL to read?

Why do you feel that reading is important?

Have you seen any changes in children’s reading, or do you think it’s more difficult for children to read in this “digital age”? Please explain.

Starting Questions for U.S. Teacher:
How did you encourage your students to read?

Have you encouraged reading in any different ways due to students’ gender?

Why do you feel that reading is important?

Have you seen any changes in children’s reading, or do you think it’s more difficult for children to read in this “digital age”? Please explain.