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Audiobooks: Legitimate “Reading” Material for Adolescents?

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Association 2013), most young adult audiobook consumers prefer to borrow them from the library (Zickuhr et al. 2012). Interestingly, while the number of print materials available in public libraries has decreased, the number of audiobooks, in either physical or downloadable format, has nearly doubled in recent years (Chute and Kroe 2007; Grimes et al. 2013).

While it is clear that adolescents do indeed use audiobooks, no studies have explored exactly how adolescents do so nor what their listening preferences are. While adult audiobook listeners tend to be avid readers, it is unclear whether the same holds true for adolescents (Aron 1992).

Library and Educational Professionals’ Claims about the Benefits of Audiobooks

Listening skills contributions to literacy have long been recognized by education scholars (Pearson and Fielding 1982), and the necessity of listening proficiency among adolescents and young adults has regained prominence in schools in the United States because of the recent implementation of the Common Core State Standards (2010). The professional litera/7oo(or)3(e)4(i)-2(n)TJ T

on more-general studies of audio delivery of content: written texts that are read aloud, teacher- and/or researcher-produced recordings of read alouds, and commercially produced audio recordings of texts that fall beyond the realm of a traditional audiobook production (e.g., an audio recording of a textbook passage).

Naturally, for students with sight limitations, audiobooks facilitate independent learning. Aydin Ziya Ozgur and Huseyin Selcuk Kiray (2007) randomly selected thirty Turkish college students diagnosed as legally blind to participate in a structured interview of ten questions following improvements to a resource that made more audiobooks available to the students. These students responded that their learning improved because they were able to be more independent.

Beyond this one study focused on students with visual impairments, the research investigating audio delivery of content falls into three general categories of student groups: students with learning disabilities, second language learners, and typically developing adolescents. In the sections below we review each group of studies.

Adolescents Who Struggle to Read and Adolescents with Learning Disabilities

Much of the research exploring listening to books, listening while reading, and audio delivery with adolescent populations focuses on students who are struggling readers or who have been diagnosed with one or more disabilities. Though it is common practice for schools to regard most struggling adolescent readers as having specific word-recognition deficits (Spear-Swerling 2004) or decoding problems, it is important to note that adolescent struggling readers tend to exhibit a variety of profiles. The most-common profile is *slow word callers* who can decode but have a low semantic working memory and do not have sufficient fluency skills or vocabulary to support reading comprehension. The second-most-common profile is *automatic word callers* who can decode and demonstrate fluency skills but do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge and have low semantic working memory. Finally, many struggling readers also fit under the category *globally impaired readers* who have low semantic working memories, are not able to decode accurately, lack fluency skills, and do not have sufficient vocabulary knowledge (Lesaux and Kieffer 2010).

All students were tested before and after the study. Following treatment, students who had received audio versions of the books showed significant improvements in reading accuracy as well as reductions in certain emotional behavior problems reported by parents. However, no significant differences for reading speed, self-esteem, or behavior were reported by teachers.

Results of investigations of comprehension of audio content for adolescents who struggle with reading have been mixed but generally fail to demonstrate improvements. Elizabeth A. Boyle et al. (2003) investigated audio and print delivery of instructional content. Sixty-seven high school students receiving special education in their own history classes were randomly assigned to one of three instructional conditions: print textbook, audio textbook, or audio textbook with comprehension strategy instruction. Students in both experimental conditions performed significantly better on cumulative comprehension tests than the control group that received the printed textbook. Additionally, both groups scored higher than the control on short-term comprehension quizzes, but the differences were not significant. Two other investigations of short-term comprehension also found no significant improvements for students as a consequence of audio support. Andrea D. Hale and colleagues (2005) tested the comprehension of four students with disabilities; the students ranged in age from twelve to fourteen and were tested after engaging in silent reading, LWR, and listening-only modes. While students performance was highest following the LWR condition, improvements were not significant. In a similar but larger study twenty-five

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Implications for Researchers

Despite a number of studies exploring audio delivery of information that can inform adolescents and professionals, the findings of this review support our earlier claims (Cahill and Richey 2015) and echo those of other researchers (e.g., Moran et al. 2008): more studies investigating audiobooks and other technologies are necessary. First, very few studies have investigated commercially produced audiobooks. The majority of the studies we reviewed used audio researcher-developed materials or teacher read-alouds, yet the quality of narration impacts the listener's regard for the text (Cahill and Richey 2015). It is quite possible that the quality of the narration significantly affects comprehension, and this relationship is worthy of investigation. Additionally, long-term studies that explore adolescents' use of audiobook materials over time could investigate the extent to which audiobooks support general knowledge gains and vocabulary development. As far as we know, no investigations of informational audiobooks have been conducted and reported. The studies that we reviewed used information text more closely associated with textbooks than with nonfiction trade books. Finally, as the Component Model of Reading (Aaron et al. 2008) demonstrates, the reading process is complex and affected by multiple factors; more in-depth studies are necessary to truly understand the nuanced contributions of audiobooks to adolescents' literacy development and proficiencies.

Implications for School Librarians

Given that few studies found audio delivery to have beneficial effects on comprehension, school librarians should be cautious about using audiobooks as the sole strategy for supporting struggling readers. Conversely, students often enjoy audiobooks, and they are likely to incidentally learn some general knowledge and some vocabulary, though this growth is unlikely to be sufficient to support their reading development without additional targeted instruction (Penno, Wilkinson, and Moore 2002).

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