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# PLUGGED AND UNPLUGGED READING: PREFERENCES OF YOUNG READERS

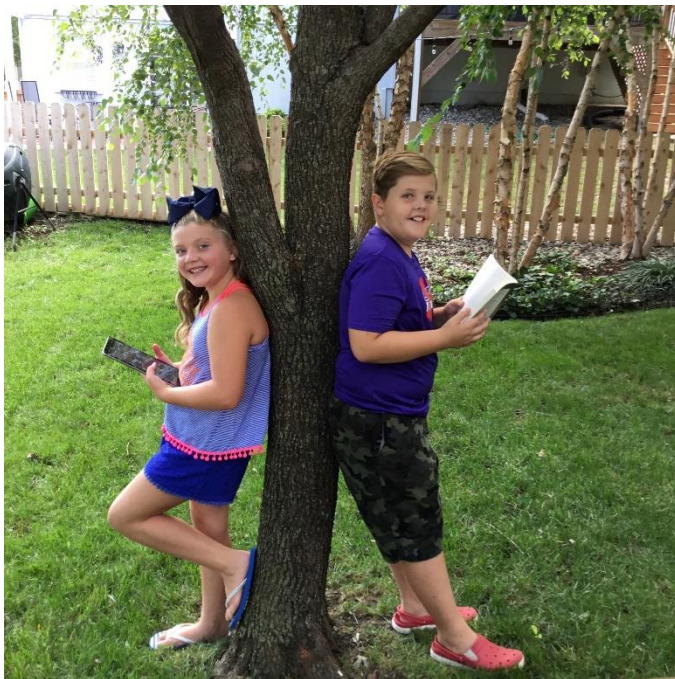
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## **Plugged and Unplugged Reading: Preferences of Young Readers**

### **Synopsis:**

Read and discover why classrooms should provide students time for plugged eBook (electronic books) reading and unplugged reading tBook or (traditional books). Clearly, preference matters to young readers!



## **The Preferences of Readers: Plugged and Unplugged Reading**

As iPad usage in schools has become increasingly widespread, essentials of reading instruction have recently and rapidly changed with the entry of one-to-one iPad initiatives in elementary schools. Current iPad research describes educational benefits (Beschoner and Hutchison, 2013; Crescenzi, Jewitt, and Price, 2014), but these benefits have yet to be evaluated or widely accepted by the field of reading (Coiro and Dobler, 2007; Dundar and Akcayir, 2012; Kremar and Cingel, 2014). Despite possible benefits, there is an absence of research supporting the enthusiastic claims that iPads will “revolutionize education” (Ferenstein, 2011). Teachers and parents wonder if reading is better or worse in electronic formats? With each clarifying study (Masataka, 2014; O'Donnell and Hallam, 2014), the rush to prove reading books on iPads is better leaves teachers with lingering questions and concerns. Is it better to have students read exclusively on iPads? Is it more difficult than traditional books or does reading this way easier? Should students be required to exclusively read in one format or the other?

Much has been written in support of reading electronically and reading researchers and teachers already know what is effective for reading traditional text (Masataka, 2014; O'Donnell and Hallam, 2014). But the interrelationship between the two formats, traditional text and electronic text, and their joint impact on reading necessitates more evaluation. And what of the perspectives of the readers themselves? To better understand children's preferences and reading behaviors with eBooks, this research adopts an evaluative framework design. To this end, this qualitative case study (Creswell, 2015) sought to describe what is unique and similar about the two types of reading: Plugged and Unplugged informed by readers themselves.

### **Who are Digital Native Readers of this Century?**

To further understand the student perspective, one must consider who are the current day

students? The readers of this century's generations are identified as digital natives or the net generation, all native speakers of the digital language of technology (Prensky, 2000). Children in elementary schools today belong to the digital native generation; those born during the age of digital technology and are familiar with computers, Smartphones, iPads, and the Internet. Prensky reports "Digital Natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to "serious" work." These students think and process much different than those of us who are digital immigrants. Teachers who themselves learned and so choose to teach slowly, step-by-step, one thing at a time, individually, and above all, seriously." (Prensky, 2001, p 2.)

## **Technology Changes Education**

### **Computers**

Increasingly, past studies asserted literacy instruction and opportunities to read with technology should be integrated into the elementary school classrooms (Maich and Hall, 2016; Larson, 2015; Kucirkova, 2014). It was not that long ago when desktop computers arrived in the elementary schools. Everyone believed they would revolutionize education. They did not. They were large, unwieldy to manage, complicated to use, and their cost made widespread or one-to-one use prohibitive. As well, these older forms of technology have been proven to be ill-suited for use by young children (Plowman and Stephen, 2003).

### **Laptop Computers**

Next, laptops replaced desktop computers in the schools. They were easier to use and mobile. However, the hardware and software were still too fragile and too costly to be used for

one-to-one instruction and there has been no consensus on whether they improved learning outcomes (Zheng, Warschauer, and Chin-Hsi Lin, 2016). Laptop computing required teaching how to interact with each kind of software because it was often not intuitive for student use. Laptops required keyboarding skills and did not have touch screen technology so they were not the revolutionary technology they were initially expected to be.

### **iPads are the Ones!**

Along came the iPad or tablet which has proven to be affordable and user friendly. Affordable apps broadened their use and the iPad has revolutionized many districts and classrooms. One-to-one initiatives have overtaken many cities affirming their affordability and usefulness for teaching today's digital natives (Ferenstein, 2011). As with anything new in education, there has been a rush by teachers and school districts to utilize their classroom iPads for everything, including reading (Beschoner and Hutchison, 2013; Crescenzi, et al, 2014). In some cases, this has meant to the exclusion of reading traditional books. Research conducted on reading electronic print asserts it is different and may require “new literacies” to comprehend (Leu, 2002; 2000; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack, 2009). As educators often conclude about new instructional strategies, balance may be the best approach. With all of this in mind, the purpose of this study was to consider student preferences and ultimately share if a balanced stance is going to be a best practice when the perspectives of independent readers come to light.

### **Methods**

This Qualitative Case Study research (Creswell, 2015) sought to describe what is unique, the same and different about plugged and unplugged reading based on young readers' preferences. Plugged reading refers to reading a book on an iPad and respectively, unplugged reading with a traditional book (tBook). The overarching purpose was to consider the

preferences of young readers for one format or the other.

### **Fourth Grade Participants**

Ninety-eight 4th Grade students in “Plugged and Unplugged Reading” were investigated. Students in fourth grade were chosen because they are typically independent readers by this point in elementary school (Wood, 2007). They are ten-years-old and have a strong set of oral language skills. They listen well but are expressive, talkative, and like to express their opinions (Wood, 2007). Although 4th graders are independent readers, some may be developing alliteracy, can read but choose not to, and exhibit a lack of interest reading in one or both stances, aesthetically, for pleasure or efferent, reading to learn (Rosenblatt, 1978). The last consideration for participant selection was to include students who have some experience using iPads outside of school.

### **Data Sets**

Data sets were collected over the span of a semester through Pre- and Post-Attitude toward Reading Surveys (McKenna and Kear, 1990) which was administered first to gauge the participants’ reading attitudes and personal perspectives on reading, either for academic or recreational purposes. A student iPad Usage Survey was developed to determine their activities on iPads and if they had ever read books on an iPad or even considered reading one electronically. The Teacher iPad Questionnaires and Interviews were conducted to share the teacher’s perspective and determine their attitudes towards the use of the iPads. Last, Focus Group discussions were held and transcribed with all students following the last phase of reading. During these discussions, students shared their preferences on the formats and pros and cons of each type of reading, plugged and unplugged.

### **Three-Phased Data Collection**

Following the preliminary data sets, the study had three distinct phases during which students read three books. It is important to note, this is a study of reading format preference. It was a purposeful research decision to not consider the book choices of the students. The teachers used independent reading time and student chosen books for the phases. Thus, the books titles the students read are of no consequence to this study. Of the four classrooms, one teacher had the students bring their iPad books to her Guided Reading Groups and the students in that group read the same book.

**Phase One: tBook Reading (unplugged).** Initially, students read a traditional book during a regular independent reading routine each day; twenty to thirty minutes in duration. As was typical, students occasionally discussed this book with their teachers during small group discussions. Following the Unplugged Reading Phase, the students participated in Focus Groups (Creswell, 2015). For sharing student perspectives on reading a traditional book, groups of four or five participants met for approximately twenty to thirty minutes to answer the questions: 1) What do you like about reading in a regular print book? 2) Do you enjoy reading your book at independent reading time? Why or why not? 2) What else do you want to share?

**Phase Two: eBook Reading (plugged).** Second, in each classroom the students read a book on their iPads to familiarize themselves with reading a book on an iPad. This was a daily, sustained silent “*Plugged Reading*” period twenty-thirty minutes in duration. As Phase Two was getting ready to commence, teachers reported a great deal of excitement among the students about reading on iPads. One teacher used the iPads for her guided reading groups. When this practice reading on iPads was complete, students read a book of their choice on the iPads. At the end of

this second book, the focus group interview was conducted with all students (Creswell, 2015) in each classroom. This was to discuss these questions: 1) What did you like about reading an eBook on your iPad? 2) What seemed the same as reading a regular book? 3) What seemed different from reading a regular book? 4) Was it easier or harder to read on an iPad? 5) What else do you want to share?

**Phase Three: Choice Text-Type Reading (plugged or unplugged).** The third phase choice book was determined by each student's preference: *Plugged or Unplugged Reading*. (Table 3) At the end of this last book, the Post Attitude toward Reading Survey was completed and a focus group interview was conducted with the students in each classroom (Creswell, 2015). The purpose of this Focus Group was to ask students to inform these questions: 1) Did you choose to read your last book as an eBook or a tBook? Why? 2) What did you notice was good about reading an eBook on an iPad or tBook? (Positive comments) 3) What did you not like or enjoy about reading an eBook on an iPad or tBook? (Negative comments); 4) Which do you think might be better for you? Why? 5) Has reading an eBook on an iPad changed how you think and feel about reading? How?

### **Data Analysis**

The Plugged and Unplugged Reading was conducted as a qualitative case study (Yin, 2008). Inductive thinking for qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2015; Yin, 2008) was used. Initially, analysis procedures included charting and coding the survey responses to determine student attitudes toward reading and prior usage habits with iPads. Transcription and coding of teacher interviews and focus group discussions was completed for constant comparative analysis (Creswell, 2015). During the viewing and reading of all data, analytical notes were composed and analyzed. By reviewing all survey data and focus group transcriptions alongside the



reflective analytical notes, themes and categories emerged that answered this case study's questions. Disconfirming evidence was also considered and tempered the strength of some themes and categories, rendering them topics for future research. The analysis informed the study's questions, *What is the difference between plugged (electronic reading) and unplugged reading (traditional text reading)? What are the preferences of young readers? Will reading on an iPad affect attitude toward reading?*

## **Results**

### **Attitude Toward Reading Survey**

The Attitude Toward Reading Survey (McKenna and Kear, 1990) was administered to establish which students viewed reading as a recreational versus an academic pursuit. (See Appendix A) Frank Smith (1988) in his foundational work *Understanding Reading*, spoke of the emotional response to reading as the primary reason readers read and, probably the primary reason non-readers do not.” (p. 177) Giving this survey at the beginning and end of the study was planned to identify students whose attitudes changed due to reading eBooks rather than tBooks. Before the study, sixty-four students' scores identified they were not recreational readers, considering reading an academic pursuit. Of the ninety-eight students, twenty-two self-reported scores that they were interested in reading for recreation. (Table 1)

### **iPad Usage Survey Data Discussion**

Students self-reported their iPad usage before and after the three reading phases. Most noteworthy was the reporting for reading a book on an iPad. 40% of the students in the study stated they had never read a book on an iPad before. Over 30% of the participants reported they were not aware one could read a whole book on an iPad. Since the study required them to read

an eBook on an iPad, the post study score increased to 100% who could declare they have read and experienced reading an entire book on an iPad. On a separate note, participants were queried whether they enjoyed reading “other” things on an iPad. Usage here was mixed as exactly half said they did enjoy reading other things on iPads and half did not. The reports about what other things students do on iPads can explain this data. (Table 2) After the study, these numbers changed a bit and there were more students reporting they enjoyed reading other things on their iPads.

**Same or Different.** Students were asked if they thought reading an eBook on an iPad was the same or different as reading a tBook. Before the study began, only 17% thought it would be the same and 81% predicted it would be different in some way. This thinking did not change much after the students had read in both formats. The 17% increased to 25% who thought reading an eBook and a tBook were the same. A majority of the students maintained a belief it is different to read electronically than traditionally.

**Readers’ Preferences.** Finally, students were asked whether they preferred to read an eBook or a tBook at that moment. If given a choice, 37% did say they preferred eBooks or plugged reading and 63% replied they had a preference for tBooks or reading in a traditional book on paper pages, unplugged reading. Following the study’s three phases and the students had experienced reading a tBook and an eBook, these numbers changed and there were students who after experiencing reading an eBook found they preferred it to a tBook. Out of the seventy-one students who initially reported they preferred reading a tBook, thirty discovered they much preferred reading on an iPad electronically. A small number fell in a combination category, qualifying their preference based on the purpose for the reading.

**Other Types of iPad Usage.** All the 4th graders admitted to various kinds of activities on iPads in their homes. As one might expect of this age group, the use of iPads consists of visual and interactive types of activity. The most prevalent usage was playing games using Apps on the iPad. Clearly, the digital natives of this study and beyond turn to technology for recreation.

### **Teacher Interviews for Instructional Use Questionnaire**

Teachers of the four classrooms participated in an Instructional Usage Questionnaire interview to reveal how much or how limited iPads had been utilized in their instruction. These classroom teachers had recently been provided a class set that they were expected to share. This rendered this setting of several fourth-grade classrooms an excellent, pristine set of students who did not have access or eBooks to read in school. This research study's purpose was to identify and describe students' preferences for reading as well as their reasons for their choice preferences. Their teachers were interviewed to determine their own attitudes towards the use of the iPads as well as any concerns or misgivings they held. This teacher interview was completed face-to-face with the following questions: (Figure 2)

Cognizant there are studies that report teachers are often resistant to truly integrating iPads into their classrooms because of the constraints of time and training (Clark and Lucking, 2012), these questions were posed to the classroom teachers who implemented the three-phase protocol. All four teachers expressed interest in knowing ways to integrate reading on iPads into their existing reading routines.

Because students would be reading independently on the iPads at times, their central concern was students being distracted by other activities they could potentially do on the iPad Apps. Teachers also questioned whether all students would have the navigation skills to read eBooks. A final concern that surfaced in the interviews was access to and cost of the texts they wanted

their students to read. When the study began, these concerns turned out to be non-concerns, especially the access to eBooks. Several resources online and with local libraries were located for the use of eBooks for no cost. During that interview, we also discussed how to explain to the students how important it would be throughout the study to provide their true opinions and honest feedback about both types of reading formats.

## **Findings**

### **Plugged Reading**

During the third reading phase of the study when students could choose a format for reading the last novel, thirty-eight students chose to read on an iPad and were clearly developing personal preferences and rationales. (Table 4) Of those thirty-eight, more than half had reported reading as an academic pursuit in the pre-study survey of attitude toward reading. As a result of being introduced to reading books on iPads, their thinking shifted toward viewing reading for recreation purposes as well. One student even stated a difference between learning to read with a tBook but reading for fun should be on an iPad now. Another student, a girl, confessed she had stopped reading for enjoyment “a long time ago” and that she had only been reading when the teachers at school required it. Her interest and attitude toward reading has been re-invigorated with the iPad and downloaded books. Reading had been replaced in her life with YouTube videos and Netflix. Again, a digital native, even a student like this can be harnessed toward a more positive attitude toward reading with the introduction of eBooks. Allowing them a choice appeared to matter to students like these examples.

### **Unplugged Reading**

Understandably, the novelty of reading a book on an iPad was raised the excitement for Phase Two. Every participant was required to do so. Seasoned readers, they immediately noted

similarities and differences between the two types of reading and began to develop preferences and rationales. (Table 5) As one would surmise, there were students, sixty to be exact who still preferred tBooks. Reading is personal and complex so if students feel they enjoy or can read better in a tBook they should have the freedom to do so to increase engagement (Mango, 2015). The students who still preferred reading in a tBook cited navigation distractions first. Most stated in one form or another that the eBooks were too responsive to touch and were troublesome to manage when looking for a particular passage. They often mentioned how sensitive the page turner was if touched accidentally. Maturely, several agreed when they read a tBook that is all they do with it; liking the singularity of its purpose. The students who prefer tBooks over eBooks, refer to their history of learning to read and loving holding a real book. Reading a traditional paper book still matters to them and they choose it as a personal preference.

**Qualified Choices.** Clearly, most students have a definite preference of one type of reading or the other; plugged with an eBook or unplugged with a tBook. A small number (n=8) reported being indecisive and liked a nice combination of both. Of those eight, five mentioned qualifiers for choosing one or the other, for example, for academic reading groups or for recreational reading during “read to self” time in class or at home.

### **Implications for Using iPads for Independent Reading**

The results of this study affirm reading both tBooks and eBooks is an important offering to provide students experience with both types. Following the last phase, analysis via coding, shifts in student attitudes toward reading emerged. Most students have a definite preference of one type of reading or the other; plugged with an eBook or unplugged with a tBook and occasionally there are students who will prefer both according to the purpose for their reading. Although there was a great deal of initial excitement about the use of iPads for reading, in the

final moments of the focus groups, several students reported they still held a strong preference for tBooks. Similarly, others felt the use of eBooks sharpened and increased their engagement and joy for reading.

This study also provided results informed by the teachers who kept a close eye on their students during this investigation and each one began to feel a sense of its importance in terms of student attitudes toward reading. The teacher data aligned with the student data on the first question: What is different about reading in an eBook on an iPad? Final analysis definitively provides assertion that attitude about reading is important and in many cases, changing the reading format (plugged or unplugged reading) can alter attitudes and energize engagement. Data analysis indicated multiple students felt (during focus groups and on their post surveys) the introduction of eBooks in the classroom boosted their interest in reading. This was confirmed by the teachers who noted excitement in their students when t reading on they knew they would be using the iPads.

When the study began, 86 out of 98 students had use of an iPad in the home but admitted they had never read a book on one. Most students reported they used iPads to play games and watch shows on apps like “Netflix.” It was surprising to most of the students that one could check out an eBook from a local library or purchase one to place in an electronic “bookshelf” like iTunes. Teachers should introduce students and provided time to read eBooks so students are aware it is possible and books are easily accessed through purchase or electronic check out in their local library.

### **Electronic Reading is Here to Stay**

During one of the final Focus Group discussions, a fourth-grade boy who, incidentally, began the study reporting he preferred tBooks and was not aware he could read a book on an

iPad, demonstrated how thoughtful some of the participants became about reading. He reflected:

“When I was a little kid and was just learning to read, tBooks taught me how to read. But now, I might not need them because I really like reading on my iPad. I do a lot of stuff on my mom’s iPad and my cell phone and reading eBooks just fits what I like to do now.”

This quote captures an important perspective of today’s digital native generation. It feels more authentic and organic to use technology for everything. Based on the results of this study, informed by readers themselves, reading an eBook and reading a tBook is not better or worse, easier or harder, more interesting or less interesting; they are just different. As the world moves forward with constant technology innovation, so should readers. Surveys of student use of iPads report overwhelmingly that students enjoy learning and stay more focused when using iPads (Mango, 2015). Teachers who have been provided iPads for their students want to be able to use them productively, especially for reading instruction without giving up having students read traditional books.

### **Conclusion: Preference Matters**

For better or worse, the need to read electronically is here to stay. Clearly, preference matters so one type of reading should not preclude the other. As this study illuminated, there are students out there who have preferences in each, plugged readers and unplugged readers. Teachers should provide a blended variety of texts, purposes, and now, plugged and unplugged formats to inspire students to read. It is critical that classroom teachers provide and require time for both plugged and unplugged reading daily.

## Taking Action for Teachers

### **1. Unplugged Reading**

You already do this in reading groups and during independent reading workshop time.

Unplugged reading may be best for teaching.

### **2. Plugged Reading**

Getting started just takes a commitment to helping kids become aware one can read whole books electronically.

### **3. Find places online and in your community who can provide cost-free eBooks.**

Most local libraries have electronic books available for down-loading or checkout.

### **4. After exposing students to an eBook & a tBook reading, give the survey.**

This is a preference survey for you to discover the format your students prefer & why.

### **5. Teachers have the power! Model eBooks in your daily lesson instruction.**

Incorporate eBooks into your curriculum, have kids create eBooks, & use them in your reading groups.

### **6. Make it your routine to have kids read plugged & unplugged every day.**

It is still important to insist your students read in both formats daily. Call it **Must-Do** Reading and **May-Do** Reading.

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#### Attitude Toward Reading Survey

Table 1: Before & After Study Attitude Toward Reading Survey Data

Before Study Academic	Before Study Recreation	Before Study Combination	After Study Academic	After Study Recreation	After Study Combination
64	22	12	21	10	67

Figure 1: iPad Usage Student Survey

Table 2: iPad Usage Survey Data

Total Participants Surveyed = 98	Yes		No	
Survey Questions:	Before Study	After Study	Before Study	After Study
1. Have you ever read a book on an iPad?	57	98	41	0
2. Do you enjoy reading other things on an iPad?	49	61	49	37
	Same		Different	
Survey Question:	Before Study:	After Study:	Before Study:	After Study:
3. Is reading on an iPad the same or different than on paper?	17	25	81	73
	eBook		tBook	
Survey Question:	Before Study:	After Study:	Before Study:	After Study:
4. At this moment, do you prefer reading on an iPad or Paper?	27	57	71	41
Activities Students Do on iPads			# of Participants	
Play Games			83/98	
Watch Netflix			35/98	
View YouTube Videos			68/98	
Look at Websites			42/98	
Watch TV and Sports			47/98	
Take Photographs			61/98	
Other Stuff			57/98	

**TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Do you currently have your students reading independently or with the sustained silent reading (SSR) in your daily schedule? If so long, how long to your students typically read?
2. What is your greatest concern for allowing your students to read a book on an iPad?
3. What is your least concern?
4. What is your ideal use for technology, specifically iPads for teaching reading?
5. What novels will your students be required to read this year? When they read independently, who decides what they read? Do students read the 4th grade required books or do they self-select what they read?

Figure 2: Teacher Interview Questions

Table 3: Phase 3 Student Choices

Students chose to use a tBook for their choice book reading format	60
Students chose to use an eBook on an iPad for their choice book reading format	38
Total	98

Table 4: Why Kids Like Being eBook Readers

<b>PLUGGED READING THEMES</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>FORMAT PREFERENCES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It’s so easy to hold and not heavy like a book.”</li> <li>• “I love it I can bookmark pages.” It even has a built-in highlighter to mark exact place you stopped reading on a page.”</li> <li>• “You can tap a word and it will tell you what it means. In a tBook, you have to stop and look it up. I’m probably going to learn more words.”</li> <li>• “You can change the font and make it bigger if you want. But watch out, it changes the page numbers if you go bigger.”</li> </ul>
<b>USAGE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My mom used to make me turn out the lights at night and I couldn’t read. Since you gave me my iPad, I can read in the dark. [whispers] Don’t tell my mom.”</li> <li>• “I used to only get 20 minutes a day on my iPad. Now she lets me have a whole hour if I am reading.”</li> </ul>

<p><b>ATTITUDE TOWARD READING</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It is easier to have more than one book to read. Increased joy for reading, “It’s more fun on an iPad!”</li> <li>• “I’m just more used to looking at an iPad now so I am starting to like books again.”</li> <li>• “My mom gives me more time on my iPad if I am reading a book. I am up to one hour now! She said if I need to read another chapter to show me what chapter I am on, she can give me more time. She keeps track of the chapters I read.”</li> <li>• “I only read at school when the teachers say we have to. I stopped reading for fun a long time ago. I like to watch videos mostly. I didn’t know you could read a book on an iPad. This week I just finished a biography book on my iPad at home about an Ice Skater. Now I am going to check out and download one on the Olympics because that is where she won the gold medal.”</li> </ul>
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TABLE 5: Why Kids STILL Like to Be tBook Readers

UNPLUGGED READING THEMES	EXAMPLES
<p><b>FORMAT PREFERENCES</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I like holding a real book.”</li> <li>• “When I read a tBook I only read.”</li> <li>• “When I read my eBook it was so distracting because I keep thinking about all the other things I can do on my iPad.”</li> <li>• “tBooks don’t hurt your eyes. Reading on an iPad bothers my eyes to look at the screen so long.”</li> <li>• “A tBook doesn’t jump forward. You can hold it anyway you want. If you touch the edge of the iPad it makes the pages forward really fast and it is so hard to find your place again.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>USAGE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I want a tBook when I am in my reading group with the teacher. I like reading on an iPad but NOT during reading groups when you have to look back for the</li> </ul>

**ATTITUDE TOWARD READING**

answers. It seems hard to find the answer in an eBook.”

- “I know I think about the story more in a tBook because my mind doesn’t want to wander around thinking about what I could be doing on the iPad; you know, stuff like games or watching my Netflix shows.”
- “Real books taught me to read but eBooks are fun to read on my iPad.”
- “I love my books. You just can’t hug an iPad.” (Hugging the current book she is holding)