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# READING INTERESTS AMONG FIFTH AND SIXTH GRADE CHILDREN

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Teachers have been urged to discover and utilize the reading interests of their students to promote enthusiasm for learning (Witty, 1959, 1961; Purves and Beach, 1972). By discovering reading interests, it is hoped that teachers can encourage extra-curricular reading, thereby improving reading skills through this invaluable practice. Teachers should strive to encourage an interest in reading — what better way than to provide students with “interesting” books?

This article reports the results of an interest survey given to children in four fifth and sixth grade classrooms. The author especially wished to determine if the sex differences in interest reported by so many writers (Norvell, 1958; McKay, 1968; Beta Upsilon Chapter, 1974) were still in effect today.

## METHOD

The subjects were ninety-three fifth and sixth grade students in a small midwestern city. Fifty-one of the subjects were above the national mean in reading ability (average percentile = 67 on the SRA Assessment Survey, comprehension subtest). There was no difference in reading ability between males and females.

The instruments used to assess interests were of two types. The first method employed a picture rating scale developed by Asher and Markell (1974). Children were shown a picture depicting the topic and asked to rate their interest in reading about this topic on a scale from one to seven. For example, a picture of an erupting volcano was shown, and children were asked to rate their interest in reading about this topic.

The second instrument was the more traditional questionnaire, which asked children to rate their interest in topics on a scale from one to seven. The same thirty topics (see Table 1) were presented on both instruments. Final topic score was the combined picture rating and questionnaire scores. The possible high score was thus fourteen. By combining the results of two methods, it was hoped to have a more “true” score for each topic.

## RESULTS

The results of the survey are given in Table 1. The topics are ranked according to overall popularity. In addition, the average male score and the average female score are given for each topic. These scores were

tested (using a t-test) to determine if the differences between sex means were significant. Those topics which showed a significant difference between sexes (at the .05 level) are indicated by an asterisk in the last column of the table.

#### DISCUSSION

The results of this inquiry show that there are still differences in reading interests between boys and girls. Fifteen of the thirty topics showed sex differences. However, some topics on which differences might be expected (e.g., camping, rodeo, rats) showed no significant sex differences. This may indicate a diminishing of sex-based interests.

The “winners” in the popularity contest among topics were outer space and galaxies. Many children showed by their comments that they associated these topics with the popular “Star Wars” movie and “Battlestar Galactica” television show. Boys were special fans of these two topics (although outer space was #2 for the girls, and galaxies was #4). This seems to indicate that media have an effect on children’s reading interests. The topic of “science fiction” finished a dismal twelfth in the Beta Upsilon Chapter’s survey in 1974 (i.e., pre-“Star Wars”).

Teachers are urged to use the results of this survey in order to provide reading material of interest to their fifth and sixth grade students. They are also urged to investigate the interests of their particular group of students. By using the picture rating and questionnaire techniques, teachers can provide a check on responses. Only by assessing interests can we hope to provide students with materials of interest to them.

TABLE 1

**Mean Scores on Topics by Sex (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)**

Topic	average topic score	average male score	average female score	significant sex difference
1. outer space	12.08	13.02 (1.77)	10.29 (3.73)	*
2. galaxies	11.44	12.51 (2.19)	10.14 (3.39)	*
3. sea lions	10.83	10.49 (2.49)	11.24 (3.03)	
4. volcanoes	10.54	11.68 (2.24)	9.14 (3.39)	*
5. camping	10.23	9.77 (3.57)	10.79 (4.20)	
6. elephants	10.11	9.71 (3.48)	10.59 (3.59)	
7. rodeo	10.12	10.45 (3.39)	9.69 (3.54)	
8. fish	10.01	9.96 (3.33)	10.07 (3.36)	
9. bats	9.95	10.94 (3.07)	8.74 (4.14)	*

TABLE 1 (continued)

Topic	average topic score	average male score	average female score	significant sex difference
10. rockets	9.73	11.47 (2.69)	7.62 (3.68)	*
11. birds	9.44	9.45 (2.87)	9.43 (2.99)	
12. jets	9.26	10.90 (3.16)	7.26 (3.68)	*
13. glaciers	9.24	9.63 (3.36)	8.76 (2.84)	
14. lightning	8.95	9.08 (3.76)	8.79 (4.15)	
15. baseball	8.60	9.63 (4.25)	7.36 (4.4)	*
16. sailing	8.52	7.82 (2.84)	9.36 (3.57)	*
17. radar	8.47	10.06 (3.58)	6.45 (3.89)	*
18. Coast Guard	8.29	9.08 (3.31)	7.33 (3.96)	*
19. Lincoln	8.20	8.35 (3.79)	8.02 (3.88)	
20. photography	8.13	8.06 (3.57)	8.21 (3.52)	
21. lifeboats	7.92	7.98 (3.36)	7.86 (3.54)	
22. plants	7.86	6.75 (2.83)	9.21 (3.38)	*
23. sequoia trees	7.76	7.49 (3.37)	8.09 (2.65)	
24. insects	7.52	8.55 (3.85)	6.26 (3.49)	*
25. rats	7.36	7.88 (3.55)	6.71 (3.68)	
26. termites	7.09	8.41 (4.09)	5.48 (4.13)	*
27. Washington (George)	6.72	7.04 (3.30)	6.33 (3.13)	
28. coal mining	6.44	7.24 (3.39)	5.48 (3.46)	*
29. aluminum smelting	5.95	6.76 (3.40)	4.98 (2.73)	*
30. skyscrapers	5.57	5.88 (2.89)	5.19 (2.88)	

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