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PROCEDURES FOR DETERMINING CHILDREN'S BOOK CHOICES: COMPARISON AND CRITICISM

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Introduction

Near the end of the nineteenth century the scientific investigation into children's interests first emerged. Since then many studies have been carried out to determine children's reading interests. The procedures chosen for the collection of data have been almost as multitudinous as the studies. Equally important, the kind of information one obtains may depend to a large degree on the data collection procedure selected. The central purpose of this study was to compare results obtained from two methods of data collection used to evaluate children's reading interests.

The first method was the annotated titles approach which has been used by many researchers, first by Thorndike (6) in 1941, and by many others later. Recently, Schulte (4) and Simmons (5) chose this procedure for use in their studies. This procedure is one in which children are asked to tell whether they believe they would like or would not like to read a book after listening to (or reading) a title and a verbal description of the book. This approach has frequently been chosen by researchers due to the ease of administration of such an instrument as well as the possibility of writing titles and annotations of fictitious books, thus eliminating any interference in the results due to books being chosen which might already have been read by some of the children. The second data collection procedure was one in which children examine and react to actual books and then are asked to tell whether they believe they would like or would not like to read the book.

Purpose of the Study

A comparison of these procedures was undertaken in order to discover the advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches. This is especially of interest because recent changes in society have affected the ways knowledge is disseminated to children. Never before has so much creative effort been put forth to attract the attention of the young. Television, radio, records, films present their wares in lively, colorful, inventive ways for consumption by children. Moreover, these trends have also affected the field of children's books. There are new formats available; in particular, many quality books are being presented in paperback form and many hardbound books have colorful front covers. Science books for children are being offered in formats which are more attractively illustrated or with vivid photographs; and many science books have more readable text material

than those published in the past. Thus, advances in technology have an impact both on children and what they are accustomed to experiencing and on the children's book industry regarding new presentations. One would expect that with these technological changes there would be corresponding changes in children's interests in reading and a need to choose appropriate procedures for evaluating these interests.

Children's book choices may be affected by important factors not measurable by the fictitious annotated titles procedure. In many fictitious annotated titles studies vocabulary was not controlled in the annotations since the descriptions were read aloud by teachers. While this effectively eliminates the problem of reading difficulty level, it can be questioned whether that elimination is desirable. Reading difficulty could likely be a strong factor influencing choice. In eliminating this variable, the researcher may know the topical interests of children, but not necessarily their reading interests. By the very nature of certain topics, the reading difficulty may be greater or less, thereby influencing the child's reading interests. In addition, style may affect children's choices. For example, the use of dialogue in a book may attract some children, may repel other children. Matters pertaining to style are not easily assessed by a child while listening to an annotated title. Format could be a decisive factor in choice. It is possible that children accustomed from early years to exciting visual experiences, often in living color via television, may be far more dependent on sight and thus, format may be a more important factor in determining their actual interests than in the past.

The immense numbers of studies of children's reading interests provided educators with considerable knowledge, but, at times, such an amplitude obscures the very information being sought. Critical evaluation of the studies already completed is needed; careful attention must be paid to the procedures used in data collection in order to determine whether the terms used in description are well defined. This study was undertaken to give careful consideration to two data collection procedures and to the differences in results which may be attributable mainly to these procedures.

NULL HYPOTHESES

1. There is no significant difference in children's choices of literature which may be attributed to sex alone. (H_0 : Sex)
2. There is no significant difference in children's choices of literature attributable to data collection procedure. (H_0 : Procedure)
3. There is no significant interaction of sex and data collection procedures on children's choices of literature. (H_0 : Sex x Procedure)
4. There is no significant difference in children's choices of literature which may be attributed to categories of literature. (H_0 : Categories)
5. There is no significant interaction of sex and category of literature on children's choices of literature. (H_0 : Sex x Categories)
6. There is no significant interaction between data collection procedures and categories of literature on children's choices of literature. (H_0 : Procedures x Categories)

7. There is no significant interaction between sex, data collection procedures, and categories of literature on children's choices of literature. (H_0 : Sex x Procedures x Categories)

PROCEDURES

The results received when children reacted to a reading interest inventory composed of annotated titles were compared with the results received when children examined actual books. In order to make such a comparison of these two procedures, a modification of the annotated titles procedure was required. In earlier studies the annotations were of fictitious books, a method which eliminates any chance of a child having read the book; in this study 26 actual books were chosen for examination and also for annotation. A comparison was then made between the results obtained. The books selected (and annotations) belonged to three different interest categories: realistic fiction, fanciful fiction and science. These particular categories were chosen in order to have both fiction and non-fiction represented. Moreover, science books were especially important to this study since it was thought possible that recent science books with highly attractive formats could not be adequately described by annotations. Since the major purpose for this study was not to determine the relative importance of categories of children's interest, but to determine whether the use of annotated titles accurately depicts children's book choices, the number of categories was limited to three.

A total of 161 subjects, all fifth grade children, was distributed into the two groups as follows: Group AT (annotated titles collection procedure): 83 total, 45 boys and 38 girls; and Group HB (hardbound actual books group): 78 total, 42 boys and 36 girls. The subjects ranged in age from 9 to 11 and attended the public schools of Leon County, Florida. The subjects for this study were chosen by random selection of classes from all the fifth grade classes in the county. Thereafter, a class list was obtained from each teacher; each pupil of each class was then assigned randomly to one of the groups. The first group (Group AT) listened to titles with brief annotations of twenty-six actual books. After listening to each title and annotation, the children were asked to circle on the answer sheet *yes*, *no* or *?*, depending on whether they believed they would like, would not like or could not decide whether they would like to read the book. The second group (Group HB) examined actual books in hardcover editions. These books were the same titles as those annotated for Group AT. Each book had a numbered label placed on the lower right hand corner of the cover, the numbers having been determined by the use of a random numbers table. These books were arranged in numerical order on tables of the school library. The children were asked to respond in similar fashion as in Group AT after examination of each book. The twenty-six books were new, hardcover editions with the book jackets removed. Annotations were written for all 26 of the titles. All annotations except for the science category were written by the investigator; those for science, by an experienced science teacher.

It was hoped that the children would have read none or few of the books in the study so that their responses would indicate attraction to a book rather than reaction from having read it. Certain steps were taken to reduce the number of children who might have read a book. No book of which a film had recently appeared in Leon County was chosen. The state-adopted reading texts were checked for any excerpts from full length books; these books were also eliminated from the study. Two recent studies surveyed the books teachers most frequently read to children as reported by Tom (7). Although many of the books mentioned in the two studies were appropriate to the categories, they were not selected in hopes of limiting whatever effect might result from the previous reading of the book. This was deemed essential in order to replicate as closely as possible the procedure used by Thorndike (6), Schulte (4), Simmons (5), Jefferson (1). In addition, a pilot study was carried out in one of the fifth grade classes of Leon County not selected for inclusion in this study. The purpose of this pilot study was to submit the books tentatively chosen for the study to a group of children for their statements as to whether they had read them or not. The pilot study showed very few children had read the books selected tentatively and the two books with the highest scores were deleted from the study. The pilot study did show that none of the books in the study was likely to have been read by more than one or two children. The instruments consisted of the books, annotations, and two forms of an answer sheet. The answer sheets were titled Reading Interest Inventory and requested the information—name, age, and sex on the top. The annotations were straightforward, clear descriptions of the book. No controls of vocabulary or syntax were placed on the annotations. The annotations were read aloud by the examiner to obviate any reading difficulties. Instructions differed only regarding the procedure of listening to annotations or looking at the books. In each case the children were admonished to respond as they felt, not as they felt they should or as their teacher or parents might want them to respond.

The inventory was administered during two consecutive school weeks; during this period one-half day of availability was arranged for each of the ten classes participating. When each group of children entered the library, they were invited to sit around a large table where answer sheets had been placed. The examiner explained briefly to the children why they were there, asked for their cooperation and thanked them for their help. They were then instructed to complete the top of the answer sheet. The examiner read the directions aloud asking the children to follow the reading on their answer forms. Any questions they had were thereafter answered. Next, with Group AT the children listened and marked the answer sheets while the examiner read the annotations aloud. The actual books were nowhere in sight during the administration of the inventory to this group. With Group HB the children were instructed to go over to the tables where the books were arranged numerically according to the numbers assigned them randomly. They looked at each book in order and then circled the response next to that number on the answer sheet. When an individual finished all

the books, he handed his answer sheet to the examiner and returned to his classroom. The children were encouraged to take as much time as desired and to open the books or read parts of them if they wished. The books were placed on five large tables with about six books on a table and the examiner had the children go to the tables a few at a time so they would not be able to observe the responses given by classmates. The examiner was one and the same for both groups at all schools. Whatever effect the personality of the examiner might have had on the children should have been the same for both groups. The teachers were not present while the inventory was administered in order to reduce teacher influence. Moreover, random assignment of pupils to groups should have had the effect of eliminating any imbalance between groups in the area of teacher influence. In order to reduce a possible influence due to one group always being first, the order in which the groups arrived from their classes was arranged so that each group (AT, HB) was first, and second, approximately the same number of times by varying the order with the different classes.

RESULTS

The first step in the data analysis process was to tabulate all the responses by polling the number of *yes*, *no* and *?* responses by procedure group (HB, AT), by sex, by category, by individual book.

The statistical analysis undertaken was an analysis of variance, repeated measures design. (A copy of statistical tables will be sent upon request.) This analysis was applied to the three categories (realistic fiction, fanciful fiction, science) to determine if any significant differences existed among the number of *yes* responses by category or by sex when children listen to annotated titles or examined actual books. In order to obtain equal group size for the analysis of variance, random deletion of subjects was carried out. The F-ratios were compared with the tabled F-values to determine if significant differences existed among the various mean interest scores.

1. No significant differences were found in the mean number of positive responses according to sex alone; however, the level of confidence actually found, .10, indicates that boys may tend to be somewhat more positive than girls.
2. A significant difference was found in mean number of positive responses for hardbound books as opposed to annotated titles with the direction favoring annotated titles.
3. A highly significant difference was found in the mean number of positive responses for categories of literature with realistic fiction being the most popular, science the least popular.
4. No significant interactions were found between sex and data collection procedures.
5. A highly significant interaction was found between sex and categories of literature. Girls were very positive towards realistic fiction, very negative towards science; boys were more positive in their responses to science than to the other two categories.

6. The analysis of variance indicated a highly significant interaction between procedure and categories. Realistic fiction was chosen markedly less frequently on examination than when hearing annotated titles. Fanciful tales were somewhat less popular when the actual books were examined, science more popular. However, it was found that the increase in popularity for science was due entirely to the responses of male subjects.
7. No significant interaction was found among the three variables, sex, procedure and category.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that there are significant differences between children's choices based on annotations and actual books, differences which seem important enough to make the use of annotated titles for determining children's reading choices somewhat misleading in the results obtained. For example, boys seemed frequently unable to make up their minds when listening to annotations. Boys made significantly fewer ($p < .001$) undecided responses when examining books as opposed to listening to annotated titles.

In addition, annotated titles may not do justice to some forms of literature, namely science. Boys' positive responses to science were greater when they examined the actual books, than when boys listened to the descriptions of books. Certain single books were preferred much more or much less when the children looked at them than when they listened to them. The findings of this study tend to substantiate the concerns expressed by various reviewers of children's reading interest studies [King (2), Townsend (8), Weintraub (9), Zimet (10).] Briefly, their concerns centered on the validity of the instruments, the data collection procedures and whether the type of information received was adequately described and defined. Data collection procedures do appear to make significant differences in the responses received and apparently, on the interpretation which should be placed on the findings.

An additional factor needs to be researched with respect to annotations, namely, the bias of annotations. Should an annotator be more favorably disposed to realistic fiction than science, it is likely that she may use vocabulary which is more appealing to describe that which she prefers. In this study the science books were made to sound as appealing as possible. In order to accomplish this, a science teacher and science buff with professional writing skills wrote the annotations. Had this not been done, the results might have been even more dramatically in favor of the actual books for the science category. An example of one of the science annotations follows:

The Great Whales

Do whales have hair? How deep can they dive? How fast can they swim? These and many other questions about these giant mammals,

the largest animals that have ever lived, are answered and illustrated in this book.

This annotation makes the book sound exciting through the use of rhetorical questions. Often annotations have word choices which are more or less emotionally charged. Osgood's (3) semantic profile technique is available for the study of such semantic features. This technique consists of having subjects rate individual words on a one to five scale on several factors, such as good-bad, strong-weak, light-heavy, and so forth. Words which carry ratings towards the end of the various scales can be reasonably claimed to be emotionally charged. By randomly selecting a number of nouns, verbs, and adjectives from each annotation and developing semantic profiles for them, it should be possible to do a correlational study between those annotations which have many emotionally charged words and between children's affirmative responses. Should a significant positive correlation be found a semantic profile technique could be used to balance annotations. Certainly, if reading interest researchers continue to use annotated titles as a data collection procedure, serious efforts must be made to control for potential bias in the annotations.

An interesting by-product of the study was the difference in behavior between children who listened to annotated titles and those who looked at the actual books. Those who listened to annotated titles responded to the task in a pleasant, cooperative manner; this change in normal school routine was neither threatening nor demanding. After the inventory they were asked if they had questions. Few had questions and those were mainly whether they would do this again and why it was being done. The children who examined actual books were also friendly and cooperative for the same reasons, no doubt, but, in addition, almost all of them had questions and seemed very excited about what had happened. Their questions were about the books. Could they keep this one? Could this one be put in their classroom? Where could they buy certain of these books? Will you come back to read this one to us? etc. Apparently children became more excited about books and more motivated to read by looking at books than by hearing about them. Classroom teachers could have children circle yes or no after looking at some books in order to find out class and individual children's reading choices and in order to motivate children to do some reading at the same time. The procedure is neither complex nor time consuming; it could be done within a classroom by an individual child during free moments. It appears to be a highly motivating activity.

Typically children select books by looking them over. The results of this study indicate that, on the whole, the responses from children to annotated titles are not the same as their responses to actual books. Given these results, more reading interest studies in which actual books are used in data collection are needed.

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