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Peter J.L. Fisher

*National College of Education, Evanston, Illinois*

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## THE READING PREFERENCES OF THIRD, FOURTH, AND FIFTH GRADERS

PETER J. L. FISHER

National College of Education  
Evanston, Illinois

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Research into the reading interests of children has been undertaken since 1889 (Weintraub, 1977), with changing patterns being noted over the years. Purves and Beach (1972) reviewed close to 400 studies that were available to that date, and showed that among the most consistent findings were that sex and age of the reader influence reading interests. However, there has been less agreement concerning the influence of teachers and of the readers' race. This study examines the influence of all four factors on the reading preferences of third, fourth, and fifth graders.

It has been suggested that boys and girls have approximately the same reading interests until age eight or nine (Howes, 1963; King, 1967), but that beginning in the middle grades and throughout high school the sex of the reader influences the books s/he chooses to read. Purves & Beach (1972) argue that sex differences may now be occurring earlier, and report that in most of the research studies they reviewed, sex was found to be the most important determinant of reading interests. Johnson and Greenbaum (1982) conclude that in general boys prefer adventure, science, sports and information books, while girls choose mystery, romance, home and school life, animals and fairy-tales. Although some of the categories may vary, the fact that the reading interests of boys and girls differ seems to be true internationally (Tolley, 1977; Whitehead, Capey, Maddren, & Wellings, 1977; Summers & Lukasevich, 1983).

A second repeated finding is that children's reading

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interests differ with their age. Huus (1979) argues that while these age differences are apparent from the large majority of research, children's interest in reading peaks at about grade five and reading tastes are crystallized. However, Summers and Lukasevich (1983) found that there were clear maturational changes in reading interests for grades five, six, and seven.

Other factors affecting the reading interests of children may be the school and/or teacher. Ingham (1981) found that the schools in her investigation, and individual teachers within those schools had an effect on children's reading, not only in terms of their interests but in the amount of reading undertaken during leisure time. Whitehead et al. (1977) also found school and teacher differences.

Although Huus (1979) concluded on the basis of two studies that race did not appear to be a determining factor in reading interests, Palmer and Palmer (1983) found that there were differences in the reading interests of middle school black and white students who were below average readers. Barchas (1971) found that fifth graders belonging to minority groups showed interest in literature that concerned their cultural groups, but that in most general interests the four ethnic groups studied were more alike than different. Bouchard, (1971) reported no significant differences between the reading interests of blacks, whites, and Spanish speakers in the intermediate grades. Race and/or cultural background may therefore be a factor which requires further investigation.

There have been six main methods used to investigate children's reading interests: book titles, fictitious book titles, questionnaires and interviews, forced choice responses, library records, and pictures. Although each method has its advantages and disadvantages, in the past they have all suffered from a common problem. The reliability and validity of instruments used in the investigations have often been questionable (Weintraub, 1977). The latter criticism was addressed by Bundy (1982) in the development of a reading preference survey.

Bundy's survey examines 11 categories of interest through the use of 44 fictitious book titles and accompanying descriptions. In her study reliability was assessed using

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tests for internal consistency (estimates of coefficient alpha ranged from .65 to .90 for the various categories), and test-retest scores (coefficients ranged from .54 to .75). Responses in student interviews were compared with the three highest and three lowest category scores for that subject on the survey, with a match of 72% and 90% respectively. Correlation coefficients for the categories presented on a rating scale and the survey categories ranged from .21 to .58, and were all significantly greater than zero. Reading logs were also used to assess validity, but with the limited number of books read by the subjects, the correlation coefficients ranged from .02 to .28 for the various categories. These results are reported as satisfactory for this type of measure.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to use this instrument to investigate whether sex, grade, race, and teacher variables influenced the reading interests of children in the intermediate grades. It was hypothesized that each of the four listed variables would have an independent effect on children's preferences.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The sample consisted of 207 third, fourth, and fifth grade pupils attending an urban elementary school. The school divided the children into three "clusters", each of which was taught by a team of four teachers. A grade, sex, and racial balance was maintained in each of the three clusters. That is, the school attempted to place equal numbers of black and white students, and of girls and boys in each cluster, which operated as a multi-level grouping of third, fourth, and fifth graders.

### Procedures

The reading preference survey developed by Bundy (1982) was administered to each cluster. The survey employs a list of 44 fictitious book titles, and an accompanying book description. Eleven categories of interest are represented (see Table 1), and four titles in each category are randomly distributed throughout the survey. The pupils marked their preference for reading each book on a four point Likert scale varying from "dislike very much" to "like very much". The survey was read aloud by the investi-

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gator while the children read along and marked their answer forms.

### Scoring

All answer sheets were accepted as valid, except where the child had failed to indicate a number of preferences in an understandable manner. One point was assigned for the least preference, two points for the next, and so on. A subject's score (maximum 16) was calculated for each of the 11 categories.

### Analysis

A multivariate analysis of variance was used to test for interaction and main effects of the independent variables of sex, grade, race, and cluster on the eleven dependent variables of reading preference categories.

## RESULTS

There were significant main effects for sex [ $F(11,161)=2.27$ ,  $p < .0001$ ], grade level [ $F(22,322)=2.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ], cluster [ $F(22,322)=2.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ], and race [ $F(11,161)=2.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ]. The interaction of sex and race was statistically significant [ $F(11,161)=2.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ], to which the main contributor was a strong dislike by white males for poetry.

An examination of the univariate analyses was made to determine which categories contributed most to each effect. The individual means are shown in Table 1, on the following page. It can be seen that the main contributors to the grade effect were biography, fairytales and animals, with fifth graders liking books in these categories less than the other grades. For the cluster (teacher) effect the categories of crafts, jokes, and fairytales, all of which were preferred less by Cluster 2 than the other clusters, were most influential. Black children showed a stronger preference for sports books and biographies than white children, while white children's stronger preferences for mysteries and adventures also contributed to the effect for race. The sex effect was due to differences in all categories other than mystery and adventure. Boys preferred history, science, and sports books more than girls. Girls showed more preference for books in the categories of biography, crafts, jokes, fairytales, animals and poetry.

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Table 1 Mean preference scores in each category

	SEX		GRADE					CLUSTER			RACE	
	GIRLS	BOYS	3	4	5	1	2	3	3	BLACK	WHITE	
	n = 108	99	60	69	78	70	67	70	70	96	111	
HISTORY	9.3	10.7**	10.4	10.1	9.5	10.2	9.9	9.9	9.9	10.2	9.8	
BIOGRY	10.4	9.2**	10.4	10.2	9.1**	10.1	9.6	9.9	9.9	10.2	9.5*	
SCIENCE	10.2	12.3**	11.6	11.2	10.8	11.7	10.6	11.2	11.2	11.1	11.3	
CRAFTS	13.8	11.7**	13.2	13.1	12.3	13.4	11.7	13.4**	13.4**	12.7	13.0	
SPORTS	10.3	13.2**	11.2	11.6	12.2	12.2	11.5	11.4	11.4	12.5	11.0**	
MYSTERY	13.4	13.1	12.7	13.6	13.3	13.3	13.0	13.4	13.4	12.7	13.6*	
JOES	14.7	13.2**	14.0	14.0	13.9	14.1	13.1	14.6**	14.6**	13.9	14.1	
FRITLES	12.6	9.4**	12.3	11.3	9.9**	11.9	9.9	11.2**	11.2**	11.1	11.0	
ADVNURE	11.9	12.5	12.2	12.0	12.4	12.1	11.7	12.7	12.7	11.7	12.7**	
ANIMALS	13.1	11.5**	12.5	13.1	11.6**	12.6	11.6	12.8*	12.8*	12.2	12.4	
POETRY	12.3	9.5**	11.3	11.1	10.6	10.9	10.8	11.2	11.2	11.0	11.0	

\*\* p < .01  
\* p < .05

## DISCUSSION

The school arrangements in this study were such that the effects of grade, race, and teacher should have been minimized. The three grades worked and were taught together most of the day. They were taught by four different teachers, and black and white children were equally balanced in the classes. Furthermore, teachers observed that friendship groups did not often follow racial divisions within the school until sixth grade and above. Nevertheless, effects were found for all these variables. However, in discussing the results it may be important to distinguish between absolute and relative preferences for reading certain types of books.

When the children marked their liking for a book on the four point scale they were making a choice which reflected an absolute preference. When the scores for these books are compared, it is possible to rank order their scores to examine their relative preferences for reading certain types of books rather than others. The results will be interpreted, therefore, in terms of both absolute and relative preferences.

Although the absolute preference expressed by the children was affected by all four independent variables, an examination of the relative preferences was made by rank ordering the interest categories for each variable. Rank order correlations were then calculated. Only the sex variable showed significant rank order differences ( $r=.20$ ,  $p .01$ ).

The expected differences were found between the absolute reading preferences of girls and boys. The conclusions reached by previous researchers (Johnson & Greenbaum, 1982) that boys showed preferences for science and sports books was confirmed in this study. However, a preference that they note for adventures was not evidenced here, although a preference for history was indicated. This latter preference was also found by Huus (1964) and Robinson and Weintraub (1973). The girls' preferences for biography, crafts, jokes, fairytales, animals, and poetry have also been found by other researchers (Purves and Beach, 1972). The rank order of the mean scores for each category by sex is shown in Table 2. The differences in absolute preference are reflected in the relative preference of girls and

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boys.

Table 2 Rank order of mean scores by sex

BOYS	GIRLS
1. Sports	Jokes
2. Jokes	Crafts
3. Mysteries	Mysteries
4. Adventure	Animals
5. Science	Fairytales
6. Crafts	Poetry
7. Animals	Adventure
8. History	Biography
9. Poetry	Sports
10. Fairytales	Science
11.. Biography	History

Although there were grade level differences in absolute preferences, the only one reflected in relative preference was with fairytales. Relative preference for reading books in this category fell as grade level increased (from fifth, to seventh, to ninth). This conforms to findings from previous research (Favat, 1977). It can be argued, therefore, that the reading preferences across grade levels reflected more similarities than differences.

Similarly, as reported above, there were no significant differences in rank order preferences by cluster. The differences in absolute preference were all due to lower scores for Cluster 2 than the other clusters. When the overall mean scores for each cluster are compared, Cluster 2 (mean score = 11.22) scored lower than both Cluster 1 (12.03) and Cluster 3 (11.98). This overall mean score could be viewed as reflecting an interest in recreational reading generally, in which case it could be argued that pupils in Cluster 2 are less enthused about reading. Ingham (1981) found that the degree of interest children expressed in reading was heavily influenced by their teachers. This result could, therefore, be related to teacher differences. An alternative explanation is that the pupils in this cluster were more familiar with the researcher from previous visits, and their scores may have been influenced by this.

The effect of race on reading preferences seemed to be mainly a reflection of black children's relative prefer-



ence for sports books (fourth v. ninth), and white children's relative preference for adventure books (fourth v. sixth). Palmer and Palmer (1983) also noticed a stronger preference for adventure books by white children. Once again, there were greater similarities than differences between the two groups, as with previous research (Barchas, 1971; Asher, 1978).

The results obtained in the present study for fourth and fifth graders only were compared to results obtained by Bundy (1982) for the same grades. Rank order correlations for sex (males,  $r=.96$ ; females,  $r=.97$ ), and for grade (grade 4,  $r=.81$ ; grade 5,  $r=.98$ ) demonstrated significant similarities in relative preferences between the two samples. These results suggest the survey has considerable reliability.

### CONCLUSION

Knowledge of the reading interests of children is useful to the teacher and librarian in terms of developing collections for recreational reading. This study, using an instrument for which reliability and validity had been tested, confirmed previous research in finding differences in the reading interests of third, fourth, and fifth grade children explainable by the sex, grade, and race of the reader. However, there were more similarities than differences between the interests of black and white children, and between the grades. Teacher influences can be important in developing interest in reading, and could account for the class differences in the study.

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