

Do we really know what intermediate school children prefer to read?

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Introduction

Books and the accompanying skills of literacy are a multi-million dollar industry in New Zealand. The book is viewed as both the process and the product of our literacy education with the result that we have achieved a high ranking world level of literacy. What then are the reading habits and preferences of intermediate school children? As a classroom teacher I was interested in this question for two reasons: (i) I had a library responsibility, and (ii) despite my language programme supporting books and reading, and a well-stocked library that contained some 10 000 titles or so, many of my students asked for help with book selection and many complained that there was nothing to read! Does this sound familiar?

A short period of observation revealed that Intermediate school children use a library in a manner similar to many adults; many of the books taken out are read (often to completion), some are browsed through, and some are returned without being opened. A search of the literature revealed only one previous restricted study (Hay, 1984) of children's reading choices based on critic's and teachers' choices, and on the most popular books issued through the school library the previous year. I felt that children probably read books other than those from the school library so I set out to gain a more substantial picture of the children's reading preferences and habits.

Method

I asked pupils in three classes (two Form 2 and one Form 1) to keep a log of their reading for 30 weeks, including the May holidays. As well as recording title, author, genre, source and date I also asked them to rate the book out of five. As you might imagine, despite good intentions, not all students recorded faithfully everything they read. For example, many Form 2 boys in particular did not record accurately the picture and non-fiction books or magazines they read or browsed through. On the other hand, some students read and recorded some 'easy to read' titles when they realised that their log books were looking a bit bare. This probably inflated the reading total to some extent, but at least it did generate some further reading. Despite these limitations, I'm confident that the data represent a reasonably accurate picture of the Intermediate school children's reading in the setting in which it occurred.

As the log books data unfolded, I decided to interview six boys who were

representative of those who read relatively few books, and three girls who were representative of many girls who read almost entirely fiction. I wanted to probe the reasons for these behaviours.

What I found

A number of things emerged from the study. Here I mention a few key findings.

Volume of reading completed

For the 30 week period of the study, just on 100 children read slightly more than 2000 titles, giving a mean number of about 21 books, or three-quarters of a book per pupil per week. However, the number of books read ranged from one (the first book read by a Form 2 girl for two years) to 75.

Closer to inspection of the data revealed Form 1 students as a whole read 55% more than Form 2's. Why is this? I didn't collect data on this question specifically but observation suggests that Form 1 pupils are motivated by a book stock that is different from that in their previous contributing school library, a stock that endeavours to cater for their age group needs. Also, Form 1 students as the 'new chums' seem to be more motivated than their Form 2 compatriots. Moreover the overall development of the Form 2's appears to take them into a range of relationships, sporting and cultural activities that impinges upon discretionary time for activities such as reading.

Considerable differences in reading habit between girls and boys were also revealed. Only one-tenth of the top 25% of readers (in terms of numbers of books read) were boys, but boys made up slightly more than half of the bottom 25%. Overall, the girls read 58% more books than the boys. Reasons for this disparity are not clear but clearly there is a gender difference. The difference seems to extend to the types of books read. Observation indicated that boys typically include picture, non-fiction and fantasy-game books and magazines in their reading menu, whereas girls tend to read family, real-life, relationship, adventure, fantasy and horror chapter-type books.

Sources of books

Those running school libraries will be reassured to know that 72% of all books read were sourced through the school library. The boys relied on the school library for 84% of their reading needs, while the comparable figure for girls was 65%. It was interesting to note that Form 1 girls sourced 18% of their books from home (or personal ownership) and 8% from friends. In many cases these two sources provided many of the Christopher Pike and R.L. Stine books that were not available to them through the school library. Form 2 girls sourced 16% of their books from the city library. In most cases these were from the Young Adults Section and comprised books not available in the school library. Many users of the city library were high volume, advanced readers.

Most popular titles

Roald Dahl topped the list with 'Matilda', and was considered the most popular author - by both girls and boys at both class levels. This was surprising as, given continuous exposure to Dahl during contributing school years, it might be thought that the children would have read all titles. The only other authors who got close were Paul Jennings and Christopher Pike.

Of the 42 most popular titles read by the children, 14 were written by New Zealand authors, and 24 by male authors. Many of the most popular titles were read by both girls and boys, but authors such as Blume, Danziger, Jordon, MacDonald and Pike were read almost exclusively by girls. The results suggest that a wide base of titles is required for children this age.

Boys and reading

As a result of observations and the interviews, several issues emerged. The boys preferred to read non-fiction, picture books and magazines, and to do so in the company of other boys. Their interaction with the materials involved much discussion, pointing, gesturing and demonstrating with hands, and talking about related personal experiences. Pages were often flicked through quickly, and other books were frequently brought into the group to support the topic under discussion. (Such discussions could become quite noisy if not checked). Initially the boys tended to consider that this kind of interaction with books was browsing, not reading.

The main characteristic of the boys' rereading was reading 'chunks' of material and completing the reading of a book or article in the shortest space of reading time. For example, they would read the exciting bits in fiction books but would not persevere with the linking text. Non-fiction books and magazines appealed because (i) of the visual content, (ii) the boys enjoyed reading about factual material and learning facts, (iii) some of the magazines in particular related to their pastimes. The boys also felt that much of the accompanying talk was important to help them clarify understanding.

Girls and non-fiction

The three girls interviewed were proficient readers, had read 50 or more titles and came from homes where literacy had a high value. In all three cases the girls read fiction because they enjoyed the way a plot unfolds and the manner in which characters develop and grow. Unlike the boys they stuck to a book to find out what happened. In complete contrast to the boys, they found non-fiction books boring and had no interest in hunting through them for facts. Non-fiction books were for study, they said, not enjoyment. Even the pictures and layout of modern non-fiction books had little attraction for the girls.

Conclusions

The fact that the lower quartile of readers (in terms of volume read) accounted for just 9% of the total number of books read seems somewhat disturbing. I wonder whether it is possible to identify such readers early in a classroom programme and somehow lift their level of reading activity? Likewise, is there a way to help Form 2 students sustain their reading enthusiasm of the previous year?

The investigation certainly highlighted some differences between the reading activities of boys and girls. The data suggests that boys may have developed strategies to handle non-fiction material which would stand them in good stead to meet some of the demands of secondary school reading. It raises the question of how girls, who are reluctant to read non-fiction voluntarily, deal with all the expository material they encounter at secondary school. Perhaps their early dislike of non-fiction affects their passage through secondary school in some ways.

I also wonder at the impact of television viewing on children's perception of reading. The children in this study watched approximately two hours of television per night, and more at the weekends. Many television programmes are structured to provide a short sequence of action, a mini-climax, and suspense to bring the viewer back after advertisements. Have the boys in particular come to expect reading to be packaged in short, exciting sequences? If this is the case then Paul Jennings, with his short story format, has hit upon a successful formula - as evidenced by the popularity of his books. The School Journal has a similar format, and could possibly be further adapted to meet the learning needs for both boys and girls in fiction and non-fiction reading.

Reference

Hay, J. (1984) *Stories to read in class*. SET, No.1, Item 6.