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READING INTERESTS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study that examined the interest and influence of gender of students studying in International schools in Sri Lanka on reading. The objectives of this study was to find the nature of reading interest of the primary school children and to examine whether it differ by gender. The sample was selected from three International schools in Colombo district. Data was collected through a questionnaire and analyzed with Chi-square test. Findings indicated that, boys preferred comic books and the girls opted to picture books. Reading Newspapers and web pages are not popular among students, despite computer was much preferred in the past. This could indicate that children prefer to read a book. Where genres are concerned, Mystery & Adventure and Fantasy are the selection of the majority. Both these fall into the fiction category which was confirmed by previous researches. Since a vast majority of the sample showed preference for series books as well as comic books, it can be concluded that books from the Wimpy Kid and the Geronimo Stilton series can be used in order to encourage and motivate young readers by making reading an enjoyable activity.

Keywords: Enjoyable reading, Fiction, Reading interest,

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Introduction

Children's exposure to print and the extent to which they engage in reading activities have been found to contribute to their reading skill and reading development (McGeown 2015)¹. Thus it is essential that schools and teachers identify ways to increase children's interest and engagement in reading activities. To do this, it is necessary to understand the types of books that children are interested in reading so that these are made available in schools to optimize children's engagement in reading (McGeown, 2015)¹. This study was conducted with the aim of providing teachers and educators with information regarding genres of literature that are popular among students, with a special focus on how both male and female students respond to texts, which will be useful in order to facilitate a more fruitful learning experience.

Teachers must know, be familiar with, provide, and use literature that students will enjoy in order to create flourishing lifelong, readers (Higginbotham, 1999)². Knowing what reading interests their students have, will enable teachers to promote the inclination to read among their students through the recommendation of interesting books as well as through designing the curriculum to include texts and resources within the children's interests.

For a variety of reasons including pressure to prepare students for exams (Smith, 2009)³, teachers use a one size fits all approach to reading. This has led to a decline in reading as children grow older. Many students are not reading at grade level and learn little or nothing from their text books (Hanley, 2013)⁴. The Smith (2009)³ research states that student's interests are not seen as academic by their teachers; therefore, students don't feel free to read about the topics that interest them.

Over the years, much research has been done on the reading interests of middle school and high school students. However, there is little information regarding primary school students and unfortunately this is an age group that must be researched because there are several problems that occur at primary school level. Firstly, research states that pupils may disengage from texts which are readable, and yet personally uninteresting (Clark & Phythian-Sence, 2008)⁵. The danger in this is that a child, who at a young age is forced to read material that he or she has no interest in, might label reading as something irksome and unnecessary. Consequently, the child could give up reading entirely. This will then have a detrimental effect on topic knowledge, vocabulary and text comprehension; over which interest has a powerful influence (Clark & Phythian-Sence, 2008)⁵. In contrast a student who reads widely will not only develop the reading habit for life but also improve vocabulary, grammar, comprehension and other literacy skills (Handley, 2013)⁴. Whole-language theorists suggest that children learn to read most effectively by reading material such as children's books, newspapers, magazines and other similar reliable material; especially material they have selected for themselves (Goodman, 1989)⁶. The success of a reader is evaluated by considering vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. If readers can identify words automatically and create phrases without too much effort, then they will be able to perform higher order tasks such as comprehension of passages and gathering information from multiple sources (Handley, 2013)⁴.

Furthermore, research states that those who enjoy reading very much are six times more likely to read above the expected level for their age than those who do not enjoy reading. In the same way those who do not enjoy reading very much are eleven times more likely to be reading below the expected level for their age (Clark, 2011)⁷. Reading for pleasure could be one way to fight social exclusion. It will also serve to raise educational standards (Clark and Rumbold, 2006)⁸. Reading attainment and writing ability; text comprehension and grammar; vocabulary and positive reading attitudes are just some of the benefits of reading.

The Higginbotham (1999)² study reflected differences in reading interests according to gender. In general middle school students reported interest in more fiction titles than non-fiction. However, males showed preference for non-fiction categories of Sports, Science, Hobbies and Crafts and Animals; while females selected fiction categories of Adventure, Historical Fiction and Romance. This suggests a difference in interest for fiction and non-fiction by gender. In the category of biographies, the study found that females reported greater interest in the biography about Princess Diana, while male students showed interest in the biography of Michael Jordan. Research also states that texts about animals are most popular among children of both genders, closely followed by science and sports which are predominantly male preferences. It has been found that girls prefer literature, biography and history. Interest in sports related topics was higher for boys than for girls after the age of seven. Interest in genres such as literature and biographies remained consistently low among boys (Sturm, 2003)⁹.

Greenberg, Gilbert & Fredrick, (2006)¹⁰, are also of the view that reading patterns and practices are “gendered” and become more so during adolescent years. The above studies contain similar findings on the effect of gender on reading interests. When categories of reading interest are considered, it is evident that girls prefer the fiction category and specific genres of history and adventure. In contrast more boys show preference for non-fiction material with special focus on sports.

Research supports the belief that girls read more than boys and also that there are certain ‘types’ of books that each gender group prefers (Smith, 2009)³. However, studies show that many times boys do not read because it is considered a feminine thing to do. Wicks as stated by Smith (2009)³ found that many book collections available to students are strongly related to females. Nevertheless, simply providing boys with books about male heroes and protagonists will not elicit sufficient interest (Hidi, 2001)¹¹. It is important that both girls and boys are encouraged to read. In order to increase boys’ interest in reading; teachers, librarians and parents should be armed with lists of their reading interests so that books can be recommended and materials for school can be carefully selected. It was the intention of this research to give a start to such a list.

This study was conducted to investigate the relationship between reading interests and student gender in international schools in Sri Lanka which follow the British National Curriculum. Following are two of the objectives addressed in this study. (1) To find the nature of reading interests of the selected primary school children (2) To examine whether reading interests differ according to gender.

Methodology

The study population was three International schools which were accessible to the researchers. This selection was a purposeful selection of schools selected for convenience and ease-of-access, however, stratification and randomization was used to select the final sample in order to ensure greater representativeness as well as generalizability.

Table 1
Sample

Grade	Age	School No.1		School No.2		School No.3	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Year 4	9 Years	75	49	44	28	27	16
Year 5	10 Years	64	50	45	24	28	16
Year 6	11 Years	64	69	45	20	28	18

The main method of data collection in this study was administering a questionnaire which was answered by all respondents. This method was selected based on the need for a large number of responses to correctly generalize the findings of the study. Additionally, brief interviews were conducted with teachers and librarians.

Before administering this questionnaire to the sample, a pilot test was done with 10 students who share the same characteristics as the sample but were not part of the chosen sample. By doing this it was possible to identify potentially ambiguous, irrelevant and confusing questions and present a better version of the questionnaire to the actual sample. The pilot test revealed that two questions in the questionnaire, although worded differently, were eliciting the same answers. It was then possible to rectify the problem and improve the questionnaire. This further improved the validity and reliability of the questionnaire.

The questionnaire comprised 25 questions which were a mix of open questions where children had to write their personal book choices, as well as structured questions where students had to select from a given range of answers.

The first section of this questionnaire had six open ended questions regarding specific books the student likes, their preferred authors and topics which they enjoy reading most. These questions served as an introduction to students thinking about their reading interests. It was possible to find out more about the level at which they read, through those questions.

The second section included questions using a four-point 'Likert scale' for students to indicate perceived degree of interest and the final section asked respondents to rate where they read from, their favourite things to read, favourite categories (genres) and where and how they find their books.

Results and Discussions

Literature has revealed that primary (elementary) school children show preference for fiction and joke books, with very few listing newspapers. The present study too found that International school children of primary school age who took part in the study show more interest in comic books, picture books and encyclopedias and fact books. One main focus of this study was on whether reading interests differ according to gender. Therefore, the data was analyzed with those objectives in mind and the results of the chi-square tests and cross tabulations were as follows. The results according to gender for the six types are presented in the Table 2 below. The hypotheses were tested through a chi-square analysis and the results of these tests are also presented below.

Table 2
Favorite things to read according to gender

Choice/Genre	Comic Books		Magazines		Newspapers		Picture Books		Web pages		Encyclopedias/Fact books	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
	1st choice	36 (40%)	21 (23.3%)	5 (5.6%)	8 (8.9%)	0 (0%)	3 (3.3%)	12 (13.3%)	30 (33.3%)	9 (10%)	6 (6.7%)	22 (24.4%)
2nd choice	21 (23.3%)	17 (18.9%)	9 (10%)	16 (17.7%)	10 (11.1%)	6 (6.7%)	15 (16.7%)	19 (21.1%)	10 (11.1%)	11 (12.2%)	18 (20%)	17 (18.9%)
3rd choice	16 (17.8%)	19 (21.1%)	14 (15.6%)	17 (18.9%)	5 (5.6%)	4 (4.4%)	17 (18.9%)	12 (13.3%)	11 (12.2%)	15 (16.7%)	18 (20%)	19 (21.1%)
Not selected	17 (18.9%)	33 (36.7%)	62 (68.9%)	49 (54.4%)	75 (83.3%)	77 (85.6%)	46 (51.1%)	29 (32.2%)	60 (66.7%)	58 (64.4%)	32 (35.6%)	34 (37.8%)

Source: Sample Survey 2017

Since comic books were the first choice of 31.7% of the respondents, a closer look was warranted at the way the results were distributed according to gender. Cross tabulations revealed that more boys had selected the option than girls with a total of 33(36.7%) girls not selecting the option at all. In contrast, both Magazines and Newspapers are quite unpopular with students. Magazines were not very popular as a first choice. However, 17.2% selected it as their third option. This number was closely split between the two genders as 15.6% boys and 18.9% girls selected it as their third choice. No male students selected newspapers as a first choice and only 3(3.3%) female students selected it. The percentage of non-selection was also far greater in these two choices with a 68.9% boys and 54.4% girls not showing any preference for Magazines and a staggering 83.3% boys and 85.6% girls showing no preference for reading Newspapers.

The table also depicts how male and female students in this study showed preference for Picture books, Web pages and Encyclopedias/Fact books. While 13.3% male students selected

Picture books as their first preference, more than double that number of female students selected it as their first choice. Web pages appear to be not a popular choice across both genders with 66.7% males and 64.4% females not selecting it at all. Interest in comic books is significantly higher than other types of reading material. Further, more boys have shown interest in this type than girls. Girls have shown a noteworthy interest in picture books as opposed to boys. As a first choice, Encyclopedias/ Fact books are equally popular among both genders. However, Chi-square tests were conducted in order to detect associations between each type and gender. The Chi-square test indicated that, there is a relationship between gender and interest in Comic Books and Picture books. But the chi-squared test indicated that, there is no relationship between gender and interest in Magazines, newspapers, webpage and Encyclopedias/ Fact books

Percentages of the results according to gender for the six genres have been calculated and are presented in the Table 3 below. Hypotheses were tested through a chi-square analysis and the results of these tests are also presented thereafter.

Table 3
Favorite genres to read according to gender

Genre/Selection	Biography		Everyday fiction		Fantasy		Mystery & Adventure		Information Books		Science Fiction	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
1 st Choice	8.9	6.1	6.1	10	7.2	14.	16.	16.	2.8	2.2	5.6	0.6
2 nd Choice	2.8	1.7	6.7	5	12.	17.	10.	18.	7.2	2.2	7.2	4.4
3 rd Choice	5	5.6	5.6	10	8.3	7.2	8.9	8.3	7.2	7.8	11.	9.4
Not Selected	33.	36.	31.7	25	22.	10.	14.	6.7	32.8	37.8	26.	35.
	3	7			2	6	4				1	6

Source: Sample Survey 2017

The table above depicts how male and female students in this study showed preference for Biography, Everyday Fiction, Fantasy, Mystery & Adventure, Information Books and Science Fiction genres. Out of all the respondents, 16.1% males and 16.7% females have selected Mystery and Adventure as their first choice making it the most popular genre as the first choice. Conversely Science fiction books had the lowest percentages of selection with only 5.6% of males and 0.6% of females selecting it as their first choice. The Fantasy genre too shows a high percentage of selection among both genders. The info graphic shown below further illustrates the percentage of first choices of boys and girls.

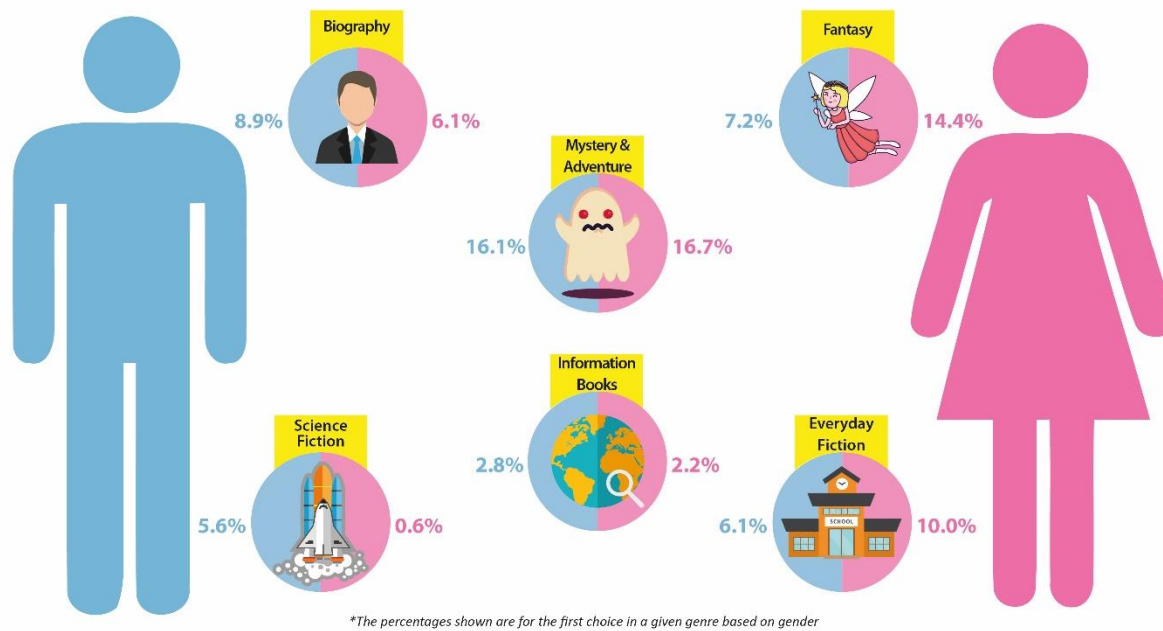


Figure 1: First choices of genres of reading material

As illustrated in the info graphic above, based on first choices alone, Fantasy and Everyday Fiction genres appear to be more popular among the girls; whereas Biography and Science Fiction appear to be of more interest to the boys. However, as this is only a depiction of the first preferences, a statistical analysis was done. Chi-square tests were then conducted on the results of the questionnaire. The results of the Chi-square test indicated that, there is no relationship between gender and interest in Biographies, Everyday Fiction and Information Books. But the Chi-square test indicated there is a relationship between gender and interest in the Mystery & Adventure genre and Science Fiction books.

Following their selection of material and genre, students were asked to write the name of their favorite author. The results according to gender are presented below.

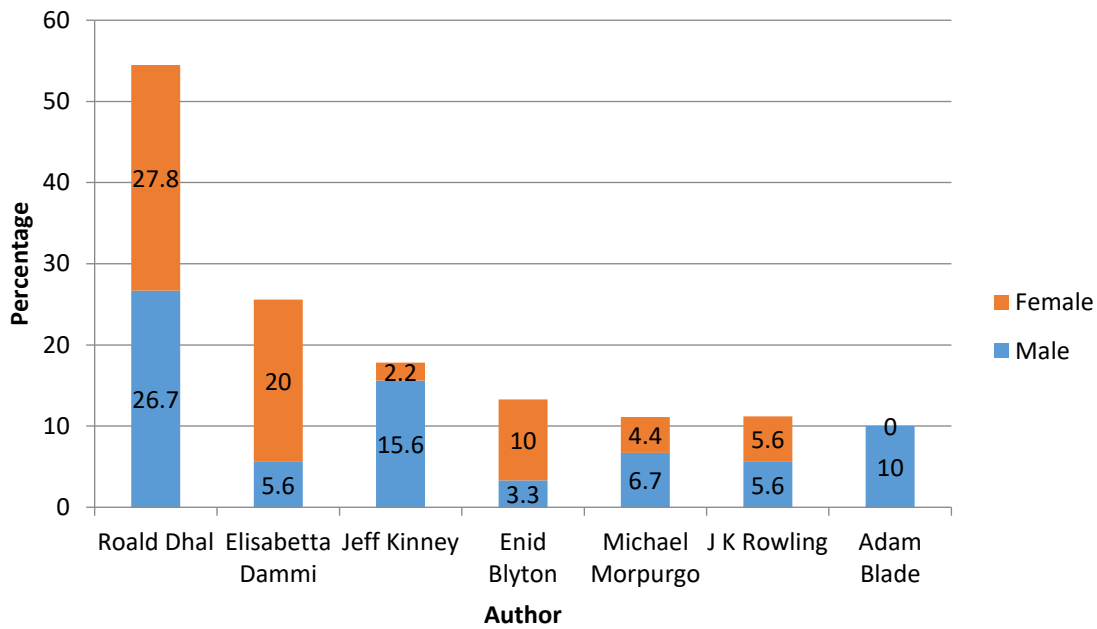


Figure 2: Favourite Author according to gender

The above figure highlights how the most popular authors were selected according to gender, with 27.8% of girls and 26.7 % of boys mentioning Roald Dhal as their favourite author. Elisabetta Dammi was stated by 20% of girls, but this was not the case with the boys as only 5.6% mentioned her. Jeff Kinney was a more popular name among the boys with 15.6% declaring him as their favourite author while only 2.2% of girls chose him. Adam Blade was selected by 10% of the boys. It is significant that none of the girls chose him.

Table 4
Favourite book/s according to gender

Favorite Book	Boy	Girl
Geronimo Stilton Series	5	12
Harry Potter Series	5	5
Wimpy Kid Series	14	2
Beast Quest Series	7	0
Matilda	4	7
The BFG	4	3

The above Graph depicts results for students' favourite book/ book series by their favourite author. The Geronimo Stilton series which is a fictional work narrated by a mouse is a popular choice among girls than boys. Conversely, the Wimpy Kid book series about a young boy and his life is the preferred choice for more boys than girls. Beast Quest books are a clear favourite among the boys while Roald Dahl's Matilda and The BFG are favourites among both genders. When asked to state 2 of the best books that each student had read this year, a total of 104 book titles emerged. The following highlights the top 6 most frequently listed book titles according to gender.

Table 5
Best books students have read this year according to gender

Favorite Book	Boy	Girl
Geronimo Stilton Series	9	30
Harry Potter Series	6	6
Wimpy Kid Series	19	7
Beast Quest Series	10	1
Matilda	3	8

According to this table the top 6 books or book series that students have read this year are all works of Fiction. Once again the numbers clearly highlight a preference for Geronimo Stilton books among the girls and a preference for Wimpy Kid books among the boys.

Comic books appear to be more popular among the boys while Picture books are a definite favorite among the girls. Similar to empirical studies, newspapers are not a popular choice among students and despite spending more time on the computer than in the past, reading web pages on the internet does not seem to be a popular choice. This could indicate that children still prefer to hold a book in their hands and feel the pages as they read.

When it came to genres, Mystery & Adventure; and Fantasy garnered the highest percentages of selection. Both these genres fall into the fiction category which previous research too has found to be a favourite among primary school students. According to the literature reviewed, fiction and joke books are the two types that were most often selected as favourites. Interestingly, the love of fantasy novels, which this study found to be more popular among the girls than the boys, has been commonly described as a characteristic of gifted students (Larsen 1999)¹². This contains implications that could be an area for further study.

Since a vast majority of the sample showed preference for series books as well as comic books, it can be concluded that books from the Wimpy Kid series as well as the Geronimo Stilton series can be used in order to encourage and motivate young readers by making reading a fun activity.

Conclusion

The range of reading interests that exist in students who participated in the above study is evident based on the results. Comic books are the most popular selection, on the whole, which is in line with empirical research. Encyclopedias and fact books are also popular among all age groups. Among the genres, the Mystery and Adventure genre and the Fantasy genre are the two most highly favoured genres by students of all ages. There is no variation between the result of this study and those of empirical studies. However, the popularity of Fantasy stories among girls is a noteworthy finding.

Geronimo Stilton books are a preference among the girls and Wimpy Kid books are a preference among the boys. While Comic books appear to be more popular among the boys' Picture books are a definite favorite among the girls. Also this study found that fantasy novels are more popular among both girls than the girls.

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