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Reading Interest and Behavior in Middle School Students in Inner-city and Rural Settings

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We examined the reading interest and behavior of students in one rural ($n = 664$) and one inner-city ($n = 510$) middle school. Responses to the questionnaire indicated that in general, middle school students are not interested in reading and spend very little time engaged in various reading activities. Further analysis of the data showed differences among school, gender, and grade in responses to the questionnaire. Therefore, although one can make broad claims about middle school students, we propose that it may be useful to look also at different groups of middle school students when trying to make decisions concerning this population.

As part of a larger study, we had the fortune of being asked to assist in increasing the reading skills of students in two middle schools. One aspect of our project was an assessment of the reading interest and behavior of the students. What makes this particular study exciting is that one school was in a rural part of the state, while the other was in an inner-city location. Both had large student populations, allowing us to analyze our findings in terms of gender, geographic location, and grade level. This article is a description of what we found.

The Literature

The literature indicates that although students in the middle school grades know that reading is good for them (Battraw, 2002), negative attitudes about reading tend to emerge during the middle school years (Ivey & Broadus, 2001). Specifically, during these years, many show a remarkable decline in general reading attitude, intrinsic motivation for reading, and frequency of voluntary reading (Ley, Schaer, & Dismukes, 1994). Since reading attitudes are greatly influenced by one's background (Coles & Hall, 2002; Oldfather, 2002; Wallbrown, Levin, & Engin, 1981), we were interested in examining this phenomena in greater detail by looking at low income middle school students in terms of their geographical location (inner-city vs. rural), gender, and grade level.

There is a consensus in the field that reading patterns and practices are highly gendered and become increasingly so during the adolescent years, with females significantly outscoring males on administered measures. Several studies in the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe have shown that females score better than males in reading (e.g., Gambell & Hunter, 2000; Hall & Coles, 1997; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). For example, on the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment of fourth, eighth, and twelfth grade students, females had higher average reading scores at all three grades when compared to their male counterparts. Researchers have found that 10-14 year old boys read less frequently than girls (Coles & Hall, 2002), and that significantly more 13 year old girls than boys report liking to read very much, rate themselves as confident readers, and read for 15 minutes or more each day for enjoyment or interest (Gambell & Hunter, 2000).

There are also socioeconomic trends. Children at the ages of 9, 13, and 17, from families with high socioeconomic status tend to score significantly higher on reading tests than do children from families with lower socioeconomic status, and these differences become greater with age (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). Often when we think about school failure and poverty, we imagine inner-city schools. However, as others have pointed out, rural poor children have many needs and issues similar to inner-city children. (Azmitia, Cooper, Garcia, & Dunbar, 1996; Heath, 1983; McIntyre & Stone, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 1995). In this study, we looked at students in two Southeastern schools, one an inner-city school, and the other, a rural school in the foothills of Appalachia.

While researchers have paid attention to differences between boys and girls, they have not paid as much attention to differences between children in inner-city settings versus rural settings. We were able to locate only three studies that looked at this issue. Duggins (1989) looked at sixth grade students' responses to a reading attitude and interest measure. Students were from three different settings: suburban, semi-rural, and city. No differences were found in their attitudes and interests across these settings. In another study, Wallbrown, Levine, and Engin (1981) administered a reading attitude survey to rural fifth and sixth grade students. They compared the results to an earlier study (Brown, Engin, & Wallbrown, 1979) in which they administered the same survey to inner-city students. In both studies, they were interested in seeing whether there were changes from the fifth to sixth grade in areas such as self-perceptions of difficulty in reading, value of reading, reading anxiety, perceived external reinforcement of reading, and enjoyment of reading comics. When comparing the two studies, while the inner-city students showed differences from the fifth to sixth grades in the areas of perceptions of difficulty, reading anxiety, and perceptions of external reinforcement, the rural students only showed differences in the enjoyment of comics. Finally, Ross and Fletcher (1989) studied the reading attitudes of third, fourth, and fifth grade students from rural Tennessee, an inner-city, and a university town. The study revealed that rural students possessed the worst attitudes about reading followed by inner-city students. The rural students viewed reading as a worthless task; the inner-city students valued reading more, but had significant

difficulties; and the students in the university town knew more about literature, saw the value of reading, and possessed the best attitudes.

Participants

Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students from a rural middle school and an inner-city middle school (n=1174) participated in this study. Of the 664 rural school participants, 363 were male and 301 were female. Of these participants, 255 were in sixth grade (128 male, 127 female), 207 were in seventh grade (118 male, 89 female), and 202 were in eighth grade (117 male, 85 female). Of the 510 inner-city school participants, 286 were male and 224 were female. Of these participants, 185 were in sixth grade (118 male, 67 female), 134 were in seventh grade (67 male, 67 female), and 191 were in eighth grade (101 male, 90 female).

The rural school reported a ratio of 1 teacher per 16.6 students, with the inner city school reporting a ratio of 1 teacher to 10.9 students. The rural school is the only middle school serving an entire county of 284 square miles with 21,000 people and is located in the county seat (one of two cities in the county). All children arrive by bus or car, with some children traveling as much as 2 hours a day. The inner-city school is a middle school that serves a small portion of a city comprising 4.2 square miles with a population of 18,000 people. Students attending the school walk or are driven in cars and buses. At the time of the study, the rural school was 93 percent Caucasian, 2 percent African American, 3 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Asian, .5 percent Native American, and .5 percent Multi-racial. The inner-city school at the time of the study was 57 percent African-American, 41 percent Caucasian, and 2 percent Hispanic, Asian, or Multi-Racial.

The two schools are approximately 70 miles away from each other and both serve primarily low-income students (at the time of the study, over 40 percent of the rural school students and 50 percent of the inner-city school students qualified for free/reduced lunches). At the time of the study, both schools administered the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to the students at the end of grade 8. The rural school students scored in the 58th percentile in reading comprehension, in the 62nd percentile in language arts and in the 58th percentile in vocabulary. The inner-city school

students scored in the 58th percentile in both reading comprehension and language arts, and in the 53rd percentile in vocabulary. Due to the low academic performances of their students, neither school qualified for any awards of commendation in any of the state's school recognition programs.

Our Questionnaire

In order to measure the reading interest and behavior of our middle school students, we designed a questionnaire with some items adapted from work previously published by Mazzoni, Gambrell, and Korkeamaki (1999) and McKenna and Kear (1990) (see Appendix). In each school, at the beginning of the school year, graduate research assistants administered the questionnaire to every general education class. To ensure that reading ability was not an obstacle each item was read aloud to the students as they completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed in each class within 15-20 minutes.

Our Findings

The questionnaire items conceptually fell into two subscales that measure reading interest and reading behaviors, with a factor analysis substantiating these categories. Initially, all of the students' responses were analyzed regardless of school, gender, or grade. On the reading interest subscale, the students rated their reading interest a mean of 2.42 (SD = 1.05), indicating a low to moderate interest in reading. On the reading behavior subscale, the students rated their amount of time engaging in reading activities a mean of 1.61 (SD = .63) indicating that they spend less than 15 minutes a day engaged in the listed reading behaviors.

To analyze whether there were group differences within this middle school population on the two subscales of the questionnaire, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted (Tables 1 and 2 provide means and standard deviations for each subscale). Results indicated that there existed group differences on the two subscales.

Table 1

Mean Performance and Standard Deviation for Reading Questionnaire Rural School

Grade 6th Subscale	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reading Interest	2.30	.78	2.67	.76
Reading Behavior	1.53	.79	1.56	.58
Grade 7th Subscale	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reading Interest	1.99	.80	2.16	.79
Reading Behavior	1.31	.45	1.53	.59
Grade 8 th Subscale	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reading Interest	2.14	.87	2.62	.75
Reading Behavior	1.62	.65	1.65	.55

Table 2

Mean Performances and Standard Deviation for Reading Questionnaire Inner-city School

Grade 6th Subscale	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reading Interest	2.61	.74	2.78	.70
Reading Behavior	1.66	.63	1.68	.62
Grade 7th Subscale	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reading Interest	2.39	.81	2.69	.72
Reading Behavior	1.75	.69	1.79	.63
Grade 8 th Subscale	Male		Female	
	M	SD	M	SD
Reading Interest	2.26	.74	2.48	.76
Reading Behavior	1.71	.59	1.70	.66

Reading Interest Subscale (Subscale 1)

Inner-city students reported more interest in reading than the rural students did ($F(1, 1097) = 18.283, p < .001$), and females in both schools reported more interest than their male peers ($F(1, 1097) = 37.858, p < .001$). In terms of grade levels, significant differences were also found ($F(2, 1097) = 12.236, p < .001$), with an interaction effect between schools and grades ($F(2, 1097) = 6.064, p < .01$). Post hoc comparisons revealed that in the rural school there was a significant difference found among grades, ($F(2, 651) = 15.203, p < .001$). Specifically, 6th grade students reported more interest than 7th grade students, and 7th grade students reported less interest than 8th grade students. Post hoc comparisons also revealed that in the inner-city school there was a significant difference found among grades, ($F(2, 515) = 8.73, p = .00$) with 6th grade students reporting more interest than 8th grade students.

Reading Behavior Subscale (Subscale 2)

Inner-city students reported spending more time reading than the rural students ($F(1, 1097) = 22.811, p < .011$). An interaction between school and grade was also found ($F(2, 1097) = 3.713, p < .05$). Post hoc comparisons revealed that while in the inner-city school there was no significant difference found between grades, in the rural school there was a significant difference found between grades, ($F(2, 653) = 7.28, p = .001$). Specifically, 6th grade students reported more time reading compared to the 7th grade students and 7th grade students reported less time reading than the 8th grade students.

Our Thoughts

When we look at our findings without breaking them down by geographic location, gender, or grade level, we find that the middle school students in our study are not interested in reading and spend very little time engaged in various reading activities.

What we find fascinating is that we would have missed important information if we had not broken down the data by gender, geographical location, and grade level. Our analyses indicated that females have more

interest in reading activities than their male peers. These results confirm previous research that found that females tend to be more positive about reading than males (Cloer & Pearman, 1992; Hall & Coles, 1997; Kush & Watkins, 1996; Wigfield, 1997) and that females are more intrinsically motivated to read and engage in reading activities for enjoyment (Gambell & Hunter, 2000; Thompson & Mixon, 1995; Wigfield, 1997). However, it is important to point out that although the females in this study rated the items higher, overall, their mean score on the reading interest subscale was 2.56. In other words, although girls showed more of an interest than boys in reading, the middle school girls were not overwhelmingly excited by reading.

What about the differences between inner-city and rural students in their interest in reading and their reading behavior? The two schools were found to differ significantly on both areas of the questionnaire. As compared to the rural students, the inner-city students reported more interest in reading and engaged in reading activities more frequently than the rural students. However, it is important to point out that similar to the findings with the female students, although the inner-city students rated the reading interest items differently than the rural students the inner-city students showed a mean of 2.53. Therefore, although they may show more interest than the rural students, they are still not extremely interested in reading. In addition, although the inner city students reported that they spend more time engaged in reading activities, both groups showed an average of engaging in reading activities for less than 15 minutes a day.

In both schools, 6th grade students showed the most reading interest with inner-city students showing a steady decline in interest through the 8th grade and rural students showing a slight increase in 8th grade (but still reporting less interest than the 6th grade students). This finding is consistent with previous research conducted on middle school students' reading motivation (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Ley et al., 1994; Wigfield, 1997), but it is unclear why these changes occur. According to Thompson and Mixon (1995) these changes in motivation may be the result of the necessity for students to reevaluate their attitudes, beliefs, and self-perceptions because of the social environment that exists in middle school. Alternatively, this decline may indicate a mismatch

between the needs of adolescents and the structure of reading instruction in middle schools (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001).

This study has taught us that when conducting research among middle school students, it may be helpful for researchers to consider looking at interactions among gender, geographical location, and grade level. In this study, there were significant interactions among several of these variables on the different subscales of the questionnaire. As noted above, although in both schools 6th grade students showed the most interest in reading, there were slight variations in the pattern of decreased interest across grades when both schools were compared. For reading behavior, there was also an interaction between the students' school and grade. In the rural school, 6th grade students reported spending more time reading than their 7th grade counterparts, and 8th grade students reported spending more time than 7th grade students. Analysis indicated that the inner-city students showed no significant difference across students in different grades.

A limitation to this current study is that we were not provided access to students' individual racial/ethnic identities. While the rural school was predominantly Caucasian, the inner-city school included a more diverse population of students. Future research needs to separate the variables that were confounded in this study--race and geography. In addition, both of these schools included students who were from primarily low SES backgrounds. Another study may explore whether there are differences between middle school reading interest and behavior in children with high SES compared to children with low SES. Ultimately, it would be interesting to conduct a large scale study to explore the reading interest and behaviors of middle school students while looking at factors of race, gender, and SES in a single study. Finally, it is noteworthy that despite the elevated perceptions and reported time spent on reading by the inner city students, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills indicated similar reading comprehension scores for the two groups, and slightly higher language arts and vocabulary percentile scores for the rural school students. More research needs to be conducted before we can understand the relationship between self-reported perceptions and behaviors and standardized test scores.

Recommendations

The results of our study indicate that middle school students show a significant lack of interest in reading and a lack of reading behavior. Perhaps middle school personnel need to focus on ways in which they can improve the curriculum as well as instruction to help prevent this decline in reading interest and behavior. Although teachers need to adhere to the rigid curriculum standards of county and state boards of education, it would be helpful for them to integrate some student choice into the required reading curriculum. For example, each language arts classroom would benefit from having a library full of books serving the various reading interests of all students, with a variety of books reflecting different genres and reading grade equivalency levels (including books written below and above the middle school level). It has been found that when students are given a choice of what they read, their reading motivation increases because they are able to read something that interests them (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Thompson & Mixon, 1995).

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found in their survey of sixth grade students, that students valued reading time when they selected their own books to read quietly to themselves. To facilitate the selection of books for the library, Pilgreen (2003) suggests that teachers administer to students a survey to find out the types of books that they are interested in reading.

Teachers can emphasize the importance of reading on a regular basis, by including in each class period a silent sustained reading time. Ivey and Broaddus (2001) share that sixth grade students in their study saw "silent reading as a way to make more sense of the text at hand, since time set aside freed them to concentrate, comprehend, and reflect without being disturbed or distracted by some other task" (p. 367). While students are reading silently, it is critical for teachers to model silent reading by reading their own books (Pilgreen, 2003). Both teacher and students can talk about the books that they are reading. According to Pilgreen (2003), when students share aloud what they are reading, they are motivating others to want to read the book, and they are learning to experience the joy of sharing a book that they have read.

Teachers reading aloud to students as they follow silently in their own texts can be another important way to increase reading interest and behaviors. As Day and Bamford (1998) explain, “being regularly read aloud to at the same time as silently reading the written text helps build sound/symbol correspondences and helps students feel comfortable in the alien print environment” (p. 130). Many agree that for children, it is critical that teachers frequently read aloud to their students (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004). Reading aloud is good because it invites students to hear stories that they cannot yet read on their own, to hear the flow of written language when read aloud, and to be exposed to genres that perhaps they may not read on their own (e.g., Fisher et al.). Hoffman, Roser, and Battle (1993) encourage teachers to read to children who have poor vocabulary, negative attitudes towards reading, and/or reading difficulties. Some may question whether middle school students would respond positively to hearing teachers read books aloud. Ivey and Broadus found in their survey of sixth grade students, that children in this grade range valued reading instruction which included teacher read aloud time. The literature shows that even 11th grade students enjoy teacher read alouds (Dreher, 2003).

Following the above recommendations is no easy task. Before they can be implemented by classroom teachers, curriculum decision makers at all levels (classroom, school, district, state, federal) need to agree that in addition to increasing reading skills, promoting the interest and excitement of reading in students is also important. Increasing the interest and reading behaviors is necessary for all students regardless of grade, gender, race, culture, or geographic location. Only then can we perhaps begin to increase reading motivation across these groups.

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