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PARENTAL KNOWLEDGE OF READABILITY AND CHILDREN'S READING INTERESTS

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Parents can play an integral part in developing their children's reading skills. Supportive parents understand the value of encouraging reading by providing interesting books at appropriate difficulty levels. However, little research is available which investigates parents' knowledge of their children's interests or parents' ability to choose books of appropriate difficulty for their children.

This study investigated children's reading interests and the extent to which their parents knew these interests. Additionally, the study examined the ability of parents and children to select books at appropriate reading levels.

Method

Subjects

The subjects included fourth-grade students who were chosen at random from a population of students reading at a fourth-grade instructional level. Instructional level was determined by classroom teachers through the use of the criterion-referenced test which accompanies the Houghton Mifflin Reading Series (1976). The test measures phonics knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension. Instructional level was also verified by the classroom teachers after working with the students for two months. Of the 35 subjects, 21 were girls and 14 were boys.

The second group of subjects consisted of 35 parents, either the father or mother, for each student. It was believed that the parent who volunteered would probably be more familiar with and interested in the child's reading interests. All parents who eventually participated were women. The parents classified themselves as having middle-class socioeconomic status.

Materials

An interest inventory, the Multi-Dimensional Screening Device for the Identification of Gifted and Talented Children by Bella Kranz (1978), was chosen. This inventory uses an open-ended format.

Three books were chosen from the Encyclopedia Brown Mystery Series by Donald J. Sobol. Mystery books were chosen because they are of high interest to both girls and boys at the fourth grade level. All three books were paperbacks with identical type size, similar length, and a similar number of illustrations. These books were also chosen because of their readability levels. Using the Fry Readability Formula (1977), Encyclopedia Brown Gets His Man was placed at the second grade level, Encyclopedia Brown Shows the Way was placed at the fourth grade level, and Encyclopedia Brown Finds the Clues was placed at the sixth grade level.

Procedures

Students were tested individually. Each student was asked to complete the interest inventory and to rank the books in order of difficulty. Students were told that they would be given as much time as needed.

As a student completed the tasks, his or her parent worked individually in a separate room. This prevented students from communicating with their parents about the tasks. Each parent was asked to complete the interest inventory by predicting the answers she felt her child would provide, then the parent was asked to rank the three books in order of difficulty.

Results and Discussion

The first set of results pertains to the answers on the interest inventories. Results were calculated based on parent-student pairs. Responses to questions were scored according to the percentage of agreement. In the case of partial agreement on questions that could have had more than one answer, partial credit was given based on a student's total number of responses. For example, if a student answered a question with four responses and the parent listed five responses, with two that agreed, the

amount of credit given was 2/4 or 50 percent agreement. In cases where a child or parent answered a question with a broad reply and the other responded in specific terms, full credit was given. Table 1 reports the overall percentage of agreement for each pair. The mean overall agreement for all 35 pairs was 45.75%. Therefore, parents knew their children's interests less than half of the time.

Table 1
Agreement on Interest Inventory

Parent-student group	% agree- ment	Parent-student group	% agree- ment
1	42.8	17	35.0
2	49.3	18	45.2
3	55.7	19	57.0
4	46.7	20	67.7
5	53.0	21	50.9
6	50.0	22	23.6
7	40.4	23	34.3
8	41.0	24	63.6
9	45.7	25	16.6
10	45.2	26	27.7
11	58.2	27	48.7
12	51.6	28	50.0
13	51.1	29	53.0
14	38.0	30	42.7
15	51.2	31	29.7
16	40.7	32	59.2
		33	44.6
		34	54.7
		35	50.0

Table 2 shows the mean overall agreement on each item of the interest inventory. There were two questions where agreement was well above the mean. Question #3 concerns parts of the newspaper that students read. Agreement of parents with their children reached 91.8%. Additionally, students agreed among themselves by frequently noting that they were interested in the comics. Question #7 concerns sports. Parents agreed with their children 72.1 percent of the time. Parents of both girls and boys were equally able to identify their children's favorite sports.

Discouraging results were also found. Question #14 concerns what students like to do when they are alone. The findings indicate that only 53.2 percent of the students had parents who knew these interests. On question #4, relating to the best books that the students read within the year, parents answered correctly only 39.2 percent of the time. This indicated that parents and children did not discuss reading materials often. The lowest degree of agreement (20%) was on question #9. This question concerns students' interests besides sports, hobbies, and collections. Parents also completed this question with more information than their children, indicating that children had less varied outside interests than their parents believed.

Table 2 - Item Analysis

Item	Ave. % agreement	Item	Ave. % agreement
1	37.2	8	43.8
2	37.8	9	20.0
3	91.8	10	30.9
4	39.2	11	43.8
5	57.1	12	46.1
6	45.4	13	31.4
7	72.1	14	53.2

Results from the interest inventories indicated very few differences between boys and girls, which was contrary to many previous studies. Wolfson (1960), Chiu (1983), and Lamb and Arnold (1976) all found differences between the sexes. In this study, the largest difference in interests was that five boys read about war and none of the girls did. This study is, however, in agreement with previous studies by Rudman (1955), Chiu, and Lamb and Arnold in that boys and girls this age are interested in mystery.

The second set of results pertains to the rankings of the three books. Each book was assigned a number for the purpose of analysis: 1 for the second-grade book, 2

for the fourth-grade book, and 3 for the sixth-grade book. The rankings were analyzed in two parts using t-tests.

First, the responses of parents and students were compared to the correct ranking for all three books. A t-test yielded a significant difference ($t=3.16$, $df=208$, $p < .001$), indicating that parents were better at ranking books by difficulty. Yet, overall, parents were correct when ranking the books only 50.5 percent of the time compared to 30.5 percent for the students.

Second, the responses of parents and students were compared to the correct ranking for each of the three books. Table 3 reports these results. Parents were correct more often than students in identifying the easiest book (57% vs. 34%) and the hardest book (60% vs. 34%), but were no better when identifying the most appropriate book (34% vs. 23%). A significant difference was found between parents and students for the easiest book ($t=1.93$, $df=68$, $p < .05$) and for the hardest book ($t=2.172$, $df=68$, $p < .05$), but not for the most appropriate book.

Table 3 - Scores compared to correct answers

	\bar{x}	sd
Easiest (second grade)		
Parents	.571	.502
Students	.343	.482
Most appropriate (fourth grade)		
Parents	.343	.482
Students	.229	.427
Hardest (sixth grade)		
Parents	.600	.497
Students	.343	.482

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to answer two questions --1) How well do parents know their children's interests?, and 2) Are parents or students better able to select books at various levels of difficulty? In regard to the first question, it was concluded that parents were not very familiar with their children's interests, since they

agreed with their children less than half the time on the interest inventory. In regard to the second question, it was concluded that neither parents nor students were successful in selecting a book at the most appropriate level, even though parents were better at identifying books at the extremes of a continuum which ranged from easy to hard.

If parents wish to encourage reading by providing their children with interesting books at appropriate difficulty levels, it is recommended that parents observe their children more carefully and communicate with their children more often. In addition, it is recommended that parents seek help from readings specialists so that they may better select books at the appropriate difficulty level.

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