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READING INTERESTS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

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In recent years there has been a renewed interest in programs for gifted children. School districts are developing a variety of administrative structures: special classes, pull-out programs, enrichment within the regular class, and acceleration (George, Cohn, and Stanley, Eds., 1979).

Programs for gifted have also varied in content and focus. Encouraging wide reading or developing higher order reading skills is often directly or indirectly involved in many programs.

Treize (1977) writes that gifted children learn in ways that differ from the average in ability to conceptualize, abstract, organize, and in their ability to deal with complex associations. He states that reading programs need to meet these needs and not merely deal with what happens in books, but with the significance of these happenings.

Both Treize (1977) and Switzer and Nourse (1979) stress the importance of wide reading for the gifted. Switzer and Nourse (1979) feel that finding material of interest to the child is crucial to an effective program. They suggest that teachers utilize interest surveys with gifted children so they may serve as better facilitators of reading.

Studies of reading interests of children report similar findings. Ashley (1970) surveyed the interests of Canadian children and found that mysteries, adventure, comics, ghost stories, and science fiction were high on the list. Non-fiction, encyclopedias, newspapers, and poetry were low interest areas. One study (McKay, 1971) included children with IQ's ranging from 69 to 147. Though adventure, animals, sports, and mysteries were high with all groups, the brighter students chose biographies, humor, and mysteries more than those students in the lower ranges. Barchas (1971) studied children from four ethnic groups. There were some interests that were specific to cultural groups but all shared general interests in mystery-adventure, animal stories, and humor.

If gifted children have learning styles that differ from the normal, are their reading interests also different? The purpose of this study was to assess the expressed reading interests of a group of gifted children and to determine if their reading interests differ from the interests of other children in their age group.

Table 1
Percent Preferred Type

| | Totals | | | Grade 4 | | | Grade 5 | | | Grade 6 | | |
|-------------|--------|------|------|---------|------|------|---------|------|------|---------|-------|------|
| | G | B | T | G | B | T | G | B | T | G | B | T |
| Fiction | 88.5 | 85.1 | 87.0 | 83.3 | 71.4 | 78.9 | 100.0 | 88.2 | 93.3 | 80.0 | 100.0 | 84.6 |
| Magazines | 68.5 | 59.2 | 64.5 | 66.6 | 57.1 | 57.8 | 61.5 | 52.9 | 56.6 | 90.0 | 100.0 | 92.3 |
| Comic Books | 57.1 | 51.8 | 54.8 | 83.3 | 57.1 | 73.6 | 53.8 | 52.9 | 53.3 | 30.0 | 33.3 | 30.7 |
| Non-Fiction | 45.7 | 59.2 | 51.6 | 75.0 | 85.7 | 73.6 | 38.4 | 64.7 | 53.3 | 20.0 | 0.0 | 15.3 |
| Newspaper | 42.8 | 46.4 | 45.1 | 41.6 | 57.1 | 47.3 | 30.7 | 52.9 | 43.3 | 60.0 | 0.0 | 46.1 |
| Novel | 48.5 | 37.0 | 43.5 | 41.6 | 14.2 | 31.5 | 30.7 | 41.1 | 36.6 | 80.0 | 66.6 | 76.9 |
| Short-story | 71.4 | 40.7 | 41.9 | 25.0 | 42.8 | 31.5 | 46.1 | 47.0 | 46.6 | 60.0 | 0.0 | 46.1 |
| Poetry | 51.8 | 18.5 | 32.2 | 66.6 | 14.2 | 42.1 | 23.0 | 29.4 | 26.6 | 40.0 | 0.0 | 30.7 |
| Reference | 17.1 | 37.0 | 25.8 | 25.0 | 42.8 | 31.5 | 7.6 | 41.1 | 26.6 | 20.0 | 0.0 | 15.3 |

Table 2
Percent Preferred Content

| | Totals | | | Grade 4 | | | Grade 5 | | | Grade 6 | | |
|-----------------|---------|------|------|---------|-------|------|---------|------|------|---------|------|------|
| | G | B | T | G | B | T | G | B | T | G | B | T |
| | Mystery | 82.8 | 74.0 | 79.0 | 91.6 | 85.7 | 89.4 | 84.6 | 76.4 | 80.0 | 70.0 | 33.3 |
| Fantasy | 82.8 | 70.3 | 77.4 | 100.0 | 85.7 | 94.7 | 76.9 | 64.7 | 70.0 | 70.0 | 66.6 | 69.2 |
| Adventure | 74.2 | 77.7 | 75.8 | 83.3 | 100.0 | 89.4 | 76.9 | 76.4 | 76.6 | 60.0 | 33.3 | 53.8 |
| Humor | 80.0 | 70.3 | 75.8 | 91.6 | 71.4 | 84.2 | 76.9 | 76.4 | 76.6 | 70.0 | 33.3 | 61.5 |
| Science Fiction | 45.7 | 81.4 | 61.2 | 66.6 | 100.0 | 78.9 | 38.4 | 82.3 | 63.3 | 30.0 | 33.3 | 30.7 |
| Biography | 62.8 | 37.0 | 51.6 | 66.6 | 42.8 | 52.6 | 84.6 | 41.1 | 60.0 | 40.0 | 0.0 | 30.7 |
| Animal | 65.7 | 29.6 | 50.0 | 83.3 | 42.8 | 68.4 | 61.5 | 23.5 | 40.0 | 50.0 | 33.3 | 46.1 |
| Science | 31.4 | 66.6 | 46.7 | 41.6 | 71.4 | 52.6 | 30.7 | 70.5 | 53.3 | 20.0 | 33.3 | 23.0 |
| "How to do it" | 37.1 | 51.8 | 43.5 | 66.6 | 57.1 | 63.1 | 15.3 | 58.8 | 40.0 | 30.0 | 0.0 | 23.0 |
| Fairy Tales | 57.1 | 22.2 | 41.9 | 75.0 | 14.2 | 52.6 | 69.2 | 23.5 | 43.3 | 20.0 | 33.3 | 23.0 |
| History | 22.8 | 48.1 | 33.8 | 25.0 | 14.2 | 21.0 | 23.0 | 64.7 | 46.6 | 20.0 | 33.3 | 23.0 |
| Religious | 25.7 | 29.6 | 27.4 | 25.0 | 14.2 | 21.0 | 30.7 | 41.1 | 36.6 | 20.0 | 0.0 | 15.3 |
| Patriotism | 20.0 | 37.0 | 27.4 | 25.0 | 14.2 | 21.0 | 30.7 | 52.9 | 43.3 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

PROCEDURE

Sixty-two students who were enrolled in the Saturday Morning Experience for gifted children, were the subjects of this study. The Saturday Morning Experience is an enrichment program for gifted students, sponsored by Trinity University. Criteria for selection in the Saturday Morning Experience include a measured I.Q. above 130 and recommendation by the students' school districts. The students were distributed as follows: grade 4, 12 boys and seven girls; grade 5, 17 boys and 13 girls; grade 6, 3 boys and 10 girls. This was the total group enrolled in the program at these grade levels. The numbers at the fourth and sixth grades are limited and may only suggest trends for these grade levels.

Subjects were given a paper and pencil inventory concerning their reading interests. The inventory listed types of literature and different content areas. Interests were indicated by placing check marks beside preferred types and content. There was space provided to indicate magazines and comic books that students read. Subjects were also asked to list books they had recently read.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the type of literature preferred by the subjects in this study. Fiction is a favorite at all levels and with both sexes. Novels are selected by the 6th grade subjects more often than at the other levels. Preference for short stories increases with grade level while non-fiction decreases. Except at the 6th grade level, which includes only three males, boys select non-fiction more than girls do. Reference materials are not highly chosen, but males, again excepting grade 6, appear to read more reference material than females.

The subjects were also asked about their newspaper, magazine and comic book reading habits. As a group, about 45% said they read the newspaper. The comic section was most widely read. Twenty-one subjects reported that they read news stories and 17 read the sports section. Comic books were selected most frequently by the fourth-grade girls. Selection of comic books decreased with grade level. Magazine reading increased with grade level.

Table 2 shows the selections for content. There are some grade level differences and sex differences in choice of content. Adventure, mystery, humor, and fantasy are high on the list with a trend toward decreased interests as the grade level increases. Girls select biography, poetry, fairy tales, and animal stories with greater frequency than boys. Boys express more interest in science, science fiction, and "How to do it" books than girls. History, patriotism, and religious books were seldom selected by any of the subjects.

An open-ended question asked the subjects to list books they had recently read. Judy Blume books, Encyclopedia Brown books and others that seemed typical for the age group predominated. At the sixth grade level three people included The Amityville Horror and one girl The Silver Chalice. These people also included books that had less mature content.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the reading interests of gifted intermediate grade students do not differ from children in general as reported by Pieronek (1980), Ashley (1970), McKay (1971), and Barchas (1971). Mystery, adventure, and fantasy seem predominant in all groups. The subjects in this study did report reading newspapers and magazines with greater frequency than the subjects in the above studies. It is not known how much time is spent in newspaper and magazine reading, however. For the children in this study, chronological age rather than intellectual ability appears to be important in determining reading interests.

If the subjects in this study are representative of other gifted children there are possible implications for teachers who work with gifted children. One would simply be to accept them at their age level and encourage them to read books aimed at that level. Another implication is that teachers need to determine the interests of their students and find literature of high quality in their interests. Accept Nancy Drew, but find other mysteries that don't follow a formula. A third course teachers could follow is to broaden children's interests. Encourage them to take risks with materials and content they have never tried before. Develop activities that will send them to reference materials and stimulate higher order thinking skills.

The children in this study were in enrichment programs at school as well as being in the Saturday Morning Experience. One would wonder if there had been an effort to broad their reading interests. Direct counseling by teachers about available reading materials may be required in order to challenge students' reading interests. Teachers will also need to read widely in order to be able to suggest materials to children.

The needs of gifted children in reading go beyond merely passing competency tests. Creative and challenging programs need to be designed that will meet their needs for growth both in and through reading.

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