

The Voluntary Reading Interests of Jamaican 6th Graders

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*A nationwide survey of the voluntary reading interests and habits of Jamaican children was undertaken to discover the specific reading interests of 6th graders relative to the known reading interests of their peers in North America and the United Kingdom. A random sample of 418 6th graders attending public schools was selected and stratified according to gender and geography. Overall, the children showed a wide range of reading interests in both fiction and nonfiction categories. Gender played a large role in book choices, but the Jamaican boys defied the norm and gave a high ranking to *Love Stones*. Geography, although to a lesser degree, also played a role in the children's book choices.*

Introduction

Reading is considered to be an essential foundation for learning, and the development of a lifelong reading habit is seen as a gateway to enjoyment and personal enrichment. Consequently, librarians and educators devote much of their time and energy to finding ways to encourage children to read. Recognizing that interest plays an important role in motivating children to read, these professionals have conducted many studies to discover children's reading interests in order to develop guidelines for literature selection and use for curricular and recreational purposes. Most of the research emanates from developed societies, and so emergent nations like Jamaica rely heavily on these findings for guidance in collection development in youth libraries. Although this practice may be rationalized on the basis of the seeming universality of children's reading interests irrespective of geographic location (Schlager, 1978), it was felt that existing cultural and social differences between developed and developing societies were likely to affect children's reading tastes and habits adversely because of lack of access to books, poor social infrastructure, and an absence of reading promotion programs (Greaney, 1986).

This seemed particularly applicable to Jamaica, where some of the factors identified by Hamilton (1984) as militating against the reading habit include low literacy levels, a shortage of books, a traditionally oral culture, and a low per-capita income. The handful of studies conducted in Jamaica on children's reading interests and habits revealed that increased access to books made a difference in the quantities and types of books read; students were interested in books about African-Americans; and they were more responsive to books portraying the indigenous culture because they were able to identify with the

characters and life situations (Floyd, 1973; Jennings-Wray, 1981; Headlam, 1989).

The Study

With one of the basic tenets for collection development being a proper knowledge of the users (in this case, children) and due to the paucity of research at the local level to provide more culture-specific guidelines for collection development, a nationwide survey of the voluntary reading interests and habits of Jamaican children was undertaken. One of its primary objectives was to discover the specific reading interests of 6th graders relative to certain book types based on the known reading interests of their peers in the developed world. This report focuses only on this aspect of the study.

A random sample of 418 6th graders attending public schools was selected and stratified according to gender (girls 212, boys 206) and geography (urban 210, rural 208). Gender is known to be the most powerful predictor of reading interests (Norvell, 1973; Summers & Lukasevich, 1983; Whitehead, 1977). Geography was considered important in the Jamaican context, as it was anticipated that living in a rural or urban area could also affect reading interests (Downing, 1979). Sixth graders were chosen because at this age they tend to be at the peak of their reading. Also, 6th graders are generally expected to have clearly defined reading preferences and to be capable of expressing them (Huus, 1979; Meek, 1982; Schucking, 1966). This time represents a crucial stage in children's reading development and seems an opportune time for librarians and teachers to expose them to a wide variety of interesting reading materials while employing a variety of intervention strategies that will help to foster a lifelong reading habit.

A 14-item questionnaire was used, with two of the questions dealing specifically with reading interests and habits. In order to identify the 6th graders' interest in reading specific types of books, the students were presented with a list of 24 book types and asked to indicate their level of interest in each. The categories of books were culled from years of research findings that have resulted in the identification of some generally accepted age-specific areas of reading interests. As Carter (1986) and others have commented, children's reading interests, with some modifications reflective of societal changes, have remained remarkably stable over the last 80 years, and so this would suggest that these interests are likely to be a fairly accurate reflection of what is known to appeal to 10- to 12-year-olds, especially in developed societies. In selecting the categories for inclusion from among the many, special care was taken to have an equal balance between fiction and nonfiction types, because so often the literature revealed that boys showed a stronger preference for the latter. Therefore, any imbalance in this area might prejudice the results in favor of one gender. For this same reason and because a scrutiny of the nonfiction topics on these lists reflected a leaning toward so-called masculine areas (e.g., Science, Machines, and Sports), an attempt

was also made to include such categories as Understanding Myself and Others, Growing Up, and Dancing, which tend to be identified as reflective of female interests. All this was done with the understanding that no one list would be able to capture adequately the many reading interests of any given set of children; therefore, the findings would only be reflective of their responses to the particular list of topics presented.

Literature Review

Summaries of research findings reveal that, among other things, 6th graders are generally interested in Adventure Stories, Animal Stories, Fantasy, Fairy Tales, History, Horror Stories, Humorous Stories, Love Stories, Mysteries, Poetry, Family Stories, Biographies, Sports, Science, and several other kinds of informational works such as Machines/Inventions, Things to Make and Do or Art and Craft, Music/Dance, and Social Studies relative to how people in other cultures live (Feeley, 1982; McKenna 1986; Whitehead, 1984).

The literature also shows that gender seems to be the most powerful predictor of reading tastes, as the genders exhibited a sharp divergence in what they liked to read. Boys tended to prefer informational works and books that portrayed violence, strong physical action, and much excitement. Boys had an avid interest in war stories, sports, adventure/exploration, science, machines/inventions, and such related materials. Conversely, girls generally preferred stories about romance, family life, growing up, and interpersonal relationships (Haynes & Richgels, 1992; McKenna, 1986; Norvell, 1973; Stanchfield & Frain, 1979; Whitehead, 1977). The issue of nature or nurture as explanations for these noticeable gender differences is still controversial, but there is no denying their existence even in the face of the publication of more nonsexist literature. Some of the areas of common interests were observed, limited mainly to Adventure, Humor, Animals Stories, and Mysteries.

In contrast to gender, the likely impact of geographic location (rural/urban or difference between countries) on children's reading interests seems to be minimal, as research findings show more similarities than differences, especially in developed countries (Fisher & Ayres, 1990; Kirsch, Perhsson, & Robinson, 1976). From the few studies originating in developing countries, it would seem that living in an urban or a rural area could make a difference in reading taste due more to the availability of reading materials that would affect exposure, an essential component for fostering reading interest (Jennings-Wray, 1981).

The Findings and Discussion

To identify the reading interests of the Jamaican 6th graders, the students in the study were given a list representing 24 categories of children's books, based on previous research, as reflective of some of the major areas of interest of the average 6th grader. In selecting the categories, care was taken to maintain a balance between fiction and nonfiction (12 of each, with Fairy

Tales and Poetry counting as fiction)) as well as gender-specific types of informational works relative to the known interests of boys and girls. The students were then asked to indicate their level of interest in reading each type of book using a scale of 1 to 3 (1 = I would not like to read this at all, 2 = maybe I would like to read this, and 3 = I would like to read this very much) to show how much they would like to read such a book. This question set out to determine the general areas of reading interests of the Jamaicans for comparison with those of their overseas peers in more developed societies.

When asked to indicate their interest in each type of book listed by assigning a rating for each book type, the 6th graders would not only display their general reading interest, but also the degree to which they were attracted to a given category. For each category, a mean score was calculated (obtained by summing all scores assigned a given book type and then dividing by the sample size of 418). This way, the higher the mean score (maximum 3), the more interested the children would be in reading this type of book and vice versa. Based on this method of calculation, the following interest level scale was devised to reflect the different levels of interest displayed for each book type: 1 = no interest; 1.1-2.34 = low interest; 2.35-2.44 = moderate interest and 2.45-3.00 = high interest. Table 1 shows the ranking of the 24 categories by the mean scores for overall the sample; a comparison of the mean scores for each of the four groups in the sample and the p values for the ANOVAs used to test for the significance of differences among the groups.

From the overall mean scores, it was observed that the children displayed moderate to high interest in 15 of the 24 categories. Because none of the 24 categories received a mean score of less than 1.77, this would seem to indicate that the 6th graders were to some degree interested in all the types of books identified as relevant to their age group. This finding suggests a certain degree of congruence with the identified reading interests of children elsewhere in developed societies and would seem to support Schlager's (1978) belief that, because the developmental stages that children undergo are universal, this tends to create a common core of reading interests for children in a given age group irrespective of their geographical location.

Despite this similarity of interests seen here, one of the concerns of the study was whether social and cultural differences might in any way create any differences in reading interests of children in developed societies and developing ones like Jamaica. Although the study was not designed to test this statistically, when the levels of interest shown in some of the book categories are examined, bearing in mind the nature of Jamaican society, one is inclined to think that sociocultural situation could provide possible explanations for some of these responses. For example, the children demonstrated high interest (means of 2.45-3.00) in Riddles and Jokes, Fairy Tales, Things to Make and Do, Science, People in Other Lands, Adventure Stories, Humorous Stories, Family Stories, Sports, and Lives of Famous People. Al-

Table 1
Reading Interests of Jamacian 6th Graders

Types of books	All Scores	Boys Rural	<i>Mean Scores</i>			+p value
			Urban	Girls Urban	Urban	
Riddles and jokes (HI)	2.793	2.727	2.8	2.766	2.882	0.104
Fairy Tales	2.563	2.505	2.421	2.737	2.574	0.0087*
Things to Make & Do	2.558	2.375	2.485	2.650	2.710	0.0001*
Science	2.529	2.630	2.565	2.523	2.400	0.181
People in Other Lands	2.513	2.520	2.425	2.576	2.530	0.506
Adventure Stories	2.483	2.305	2.520	2.580	2.514	0.0339*
Humourous Stories	2.471	2.589	2.275	2.617	2.400	0.0011*
Family Stories	2.468	2.510	2.313	2.495	2.554	0.125
Sports	2.467	2.630	2.597	2.323	2.330	0.0006*
Lives of Famous People	2.465	2.385	2.425	2.578	2.466	0.379
Animal Stories	2.447	2.525	2.303	2.471	2.485	0.143
Growing Up	2.434	2.530	2.212	2.500	2.490	0.015*
Poetry	2.431	2.239	2.415	2.476	2.578	0.0041*
Love Stories	2.418	2.410	2.577	2.168	2.524	0.0009*
Understanding Myself and Others	2.393	2.290	2.260	2.371	2.643	0.0013*
History (LI)	2.338	2.346	2.343	2.298	2.366	0.904
Music	2.291	2.063	2.287	2.274	2.524	0.0006*
Machines	2.281	2.577	2.340	2.300	1.920	0.0001*
Dancing	2.251	2.020	2.103	2.336	2.529	0.0001*
Horror Stories	2.186	2.170	2.316	2.078	2.178	0.267
Mystery Stories	2.185	2.164	2.063	2.174	2.330	0.165
Science Fiction	2.177	2.135	2.336	2.173	2.069	0.061
War Stories	2.114	2.298	2.460	1.778	1.941	0.0001*
Fantasy	2.035	2.021	2.085	2.077	1.96	0.0694

+p value for Kruskal-Wallis, testing the null hypothesis of no difference among the 4 subgroups.

•Significance at the 0.002 level after the Bonferroni adjustment.

HI = High Interest (2.45-3), MI = Moderate Interest (2.35-2.44) LI = Low Interest (1 -2.34).

though some categories are typical of the group, the top ranking given to traditional literature (Riddles and Jokes—2.793 and Fairy Tales—2.563) is a bit unusual. This could, in part, be reflective of the strong oral culture in Jamaica where telling stories, preceded by asking riddles, is a common practice at certain social functions, especially in the rural areas. Jamaica is known for its achievements in sports internationally, and children are brought up avidly following the careers of our sports personalities locally

and abroad. This might contribute somewhat to the high ranking given to Sports.

The ordering of the categories revealed that, except for Fairy Tales, informational works were given top ranking in the high-interest group and out-numbered fiction (8-7) among the first 15 areas of high to moderate interest. This seemed somewhat unusual, because the literature shows that children tend to prefer reading fiction over nonfiction. However, this leaning toward nonfiction might have been brought about by the deliberate increase in the number of informational topics and the inclusion of areas of known interest to both genders. If this is the case, this could mean that if children, in general, are given a wider array of informational categories on the reading inventories used for research, they might show stronger interest in more of these types. However, the Jamaicans opting for more informational book types might be conditioned by their exposure to mainly informational works in the form of their textbooks, which sometimes are the sole form of reading material available. In addition, reading for utilitarian purposes is greatly stressed in schools because illiteracy is a problem in the wider society.

The 6th graders' interest tapered off to moderate for Animal Stories, Growing Up, Poetry, Love Stories, and Understanding Myself and Others, all of which, except for Animal Stories, are noted as being of interest primarily to girls. Noticeably absent from the Jamaicans' list of high interest were books dealing with History, Music, Machines, Dancing, Horror Stories, Mystery Stories, Science Fiction, War Stories, and Fantasy. Again, not all of these differences can be explained in terms of sociocultural factors, but here Fantasy and Mystery Stories are given low ranking when exactly the opposite obtains in North America and the UK. Although one might attribute the lack of strong interest in Fantasy or Science Fiction to an inability to understand both terms, especially as the former is used along with Fairy Tales on the list, it is a bit harder to explain the ranking of Mystery Stories. These stories have a strong combination of action, suspense, and wish-fulfillment that are known to appeal to children. One wonders if lack of access might be a problem here given the uneven state of school libraries in the country. Low interest in historical works could spring from the children's inability to relate to the social context of the story because these books are likely to deal with European or American experiences as so few indigenous historical stories exist. Horror Stories in the late 1990s to the present have a cult following elsewhere, but at the time of this study they had not yet penetrated the Jamaican market. This could partly account for their low rank.

The rest of the data in the Table 1 relate to differences between the four subgroups in the sample that was stratified by gender and geography, both of which were expected to affect reading interests. Based solely on the means, there were obvious differences among the groups as to their ranking of the 24 categories. In order to determine if the differences were significant, the data were subjected first to the Kruskal-Wallis test, which showed significant

differences in 13 categories of interest. However, it would be expected that a certain number of these results could occur by chance alone given the large number of tests performed. However, if the 24 tests are performed at the 0.002 significance level, the overall probability of identifying at least one significant result by chance alone is 0.05, the desired significance level for the study. Therefore, the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests was applied, and a further four book types were eliminated because they had p values above 0.002, which could have occurred by chance. For the remaining categories, ANOVA was used to identify the source of significant differences among the four subgroups for books dealing with Things to Make and Do, Humorous Stories, Sports, Love Stories, Understanding Myself and Others, Music, Machines, Dancing, and War Stories.

When the reading interests of the four groups (rural boys, urban boys, rural girls, and urban girls) were compared based on gender and geography, the discovery that gender affected their choices more than geography was not surprising as the literature repeatedly reported this. Boys are usually drawn more to nonfiction and books full of action, excitement, and violence. In Jamaica, 6th grade boys were little different in their greater preference for War Stories, Machines, Sports, and Love Stories, which, except for the last named, closely adhere to some of the items on the established interest list for this age group in the developed countries. The penchant for Love Stories was uncharacteristic and would require further investigation to discover the reason for such an unusual response.

On the other hand, according to previous studies, girls like to read fiction and books that contain social empathy, sentimentality, and interpersonal relationships. Literature pertaining to war or containing too much violence is usually shunned. In part, the Jamaican 6th graders did not reflect all these preferences in terms of fiction, as they showed a greater interest in nonfiction topics like Understanding Myself and Others, Dancing, Music, and Things to Make and Do. This was a bit unusual and might indicate that girls might choose more nonfiction topics if the former are given a wider range of interesting categories from which to choose. However, although these categories contained no fiction, it should be noted that they veered toward the expressive arts and the affective domain, both of which are usually identified as attractive to girls. In keeping with standard expectations (Feeley, 1982), the girls showed strong repugnance for violence by the low mean score of each group: 1.7 and .1.9 compared with the boys' much higher scores (2.29 and 2.46).

With regard to geographic location, in developed countries, it is normally expected that this would have much influence on book choices. However, in emergent nations, it was thought that it could be a contributing factor. In the Jamaican setting, urban children were more interested in Love Stories, Music, and War Stories, which could be due to their proximity to bookstores, theaters, and cinemas. Bookstores are situated mostly in the

urban areas, and they stock several romance series published in paperback specially aimed at young readers. Urban children have a better chance of visiting music stores, hearing the latest recordings, and attending musical concerts. Their appetite for War Stories could also be fuelled by the films that focus on this topic. Rural children's affinity for Humorous Stories could arise from greater exposure to storytelling and the oral folk culture, whereas their interest in Machines could spring from the agrarian setting in which they live. For books about Understanding Myself and Others, there was an interaction between geography and gender that saw urban girls being by far the most interested in this category and urban boys the least attracted to it.

Conclusions

The findings showed that, in general, Jamaican 6th graders shared a common core of reading interests with their peers from developed countries in North America and the UK. This implies that local librarians were not misguided in their use of research findings from developed countries to guide the selection of reading materials in Jamaica. However, this should not negate the need for the inclusion of indigenous literature with the proviso that it too reflects the book types identified as appealing to this age group. At the same time, attention should be given to the important differences in interest levels for some categories, which would mean purchasing more of these for libraries. Girls' greater inclination toward nonfiction works that dealt with the expressive arts should be given cognizance when selecting informational works.

Overall, the children showed a wide range of reading interests, which suggests that their libraries should be stocked with a good mix of fiction and nonfiction. Although gender played a large role in book choices, librarians should be cautious about stereotyping readers based on this, not only because this would be in keeping with the modern tendency toward nonsexist books, but also because serious errors in judgment can be made, as might be the case with the Jamaican boys who defied the norm and gave a high ranking to Love Stories.

With regard to geographic location affecting reading interests, it must first be noted that differences between the four groups are not easily explained, because reading interests are affected by many social and personal factors such as age, gender, intellectual and reading ability, home environment, and role models—not all of which were explored in this aspect of the study. Nevertheless, although the broad areas of interest seem similar for children in developed and developing societies, and gender was responsible for most of the main reactions, geography, although to a lesser degree, featured in six of the nine significant cases. This would seem to suggest that for developing countries, geography did matter somewhat, which seemed hardly the case in the developed world.

Because it is accepted that the development of interest and persistence in reading is largely contingent on exposure to a wide variety of books (In-

gham, 1981), then definitely geography becomes a problem for Jamaica whether in terms of it being a developing country with limited resources to buy books or in terms of Jamaicans living in different parts of the country where there is limited access to and availability of books, especially for recreational reading. Sometimes, depending on where the children live or attend school, they might not have access to the same types of books because in many instances, library services are uneven and sporadic and there is hardly any other means of gaining access to a steady supply of books for recreational reading. This could account for differences in choices between urban and rural youths. This disparity, caused by geography, gives credence to Greaney's (1986) idea that where a child lives in the developing world could affect his or her reading interests and habits.

Last, more research, perhaps of a qualitative nature, needs to be undertaken to gain deeper insights into some of the sociocultural and personal factors that inform book choices made by Jamaican children.

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