

# **The Reading Experiences and Interests of Junior School Children**

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## **Introduction**

As part of the Exeter Extending Literacy (EXEL) project, based at the University of Exeter in the South West of England, we recently conducted a survey of over 450 junior children to explore some aspects of their views about and experience of reading. As part of that survey we were trying to find out what these children were actually reading in school and what their reading preferences were. In parallel with this enquiry, we also surveyed over 100 teachers about their views and practices in language and literacy teaching and further interviewed, at some length, the 20 class teachers of the surveyed children. The responses of both groups provide some revealing insights into what children read and what influences that reading.

Somewhat surprisingly, research into children's reading preferences has been rather sparse, especially over the past decade. Little has been done to update the two major studies: the large scale quantitative survey of Whitehead (1977), and the in-depth study of Ingham (1981). Given developments in children's book publishing during the eighties and early nineties the findings of these studies in terms of what children prefer to read are inevitably dated. More detailed comparisons with these findings will be made as we discuss our own findings but of major interest at this juncture is the point made by Taverner (1990) that the history of children's reading is characterised by a significant increase in the range of materials available to them to read. From the finding of Jenkinson (1940) that the majority of children's reading was actually of books intended for adults, to the listing in the report of the National Curriculum working party (DES, 1988) of 200 authors whose books give reading pleasure to children (a list which, the authors of this report admit "is by no means comprehensive"), book provision and the likely consequences of this for book reading seem to have developed rapidly.

If investigations into children's reading interests and experiences are dated, then attempts to enquire into the relationships between these experiences and the views and practices of children's teachers are, as far as we can tell, non-existent. Yet most teachers would feel that their actions in the classroom and the classroom environment they provide for reading would have very significant impact upon the reading interests of their children. The survey reported here represents a preliminary attempt to investigate this area.

## **The survey**

After an initial warm-up general discussion about reading, the children in the survey were each given a short questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire contained the following two questions relevant to this report: What did you read yesterday in school? What do you like reading best? Altogether, the questionnaire contained six questions

and took, on average, around twenty minutes for the children to complete. The 464 children involved ranged in age from seven to eleven years old in the following proportions: 56 seven-year-olds, 154 eight-year-olds, 133 nine-year-olds, 94 ten-year-olds and 45 eleven-year-olds.

The 106 teachers surveyed were each asked to rate particular reading development activities according to a five point Likert scale ranging from Very Useful to Not at all useful. The activities most relevant to this article were: Sustained silent reading, Reading to children, Children reading comics. The teachers were also asked to estimate their level of use of these activities according to the following scale: Regular Use (Every day or few days); Occasional Use (From weekly to monthly); Intermittent Use; (Less than once a month); Never Use.

The 20 interviewees were, in addition, asked for their comments about these activities.

All surveyed teachers were asked to describe their aims for the teaching of reading to their present children and to list the resources and materials they were currently using to achieve these.

## **Survey findings**

### ***Sustained silent reading time***

It appears from our survey of teachers that providing children with regular, extended opportunities to read is now accepted classroom practice. 87% claimed they gave their classes time for sustained silent reading (S.S.R.) every day or every few days whilst a further 12% did this on a weekly basis. Only one teacher, a remedial support teacher, said she never provided for this activity. Twelve years ago Southgate et al (1981) recommended the adoption of this strategy in preference to the then more common practice of reading time being largely limited to random five minute sessions as children completed other work or as the register was called. Numerous commentators have stressed the importance of an extended reading time for children of all ages (for example, Campbell, 1990; Fenwick, 1988), although the activity has received less systematic research investigation than one might expect. From our results it appears to be a practice now widely established in primary classrooms.

In response to the question, 'How useful do you find this activity?', 63% of the questioned teachers found it very useful and 29% teachers found it useful whilst only 8% were not sure or found it not very helpful. For these teachers, their reservations related to its value for specific groups of children rather than for the practice as a whole. For example:

Year 3/4 teacher: I question its value for some children - especially the ones who are not really reading. But even for those I suppose it's providing a model.

Year 4 teacher: It's different for different children, some can't concentrate for long.

We must, of course, be wary about jumping to the conclusion that because teachers claim to use an activity they always implement it thoroughly. However, it is very clear

that these teachers are aware of the need to offer children specific opportunities to immerse themselves in reading and attempt to provide these in their classrooms.

***Children's reading experience***

And what were the children actually reading during this reading time? The material they claimed to be reading fell into the classification listed in Figure 1.

***Figure 1: Material being read by survey children***

*N.B The total is greater than the 464 children interviewed as some children mentioned more than one book*

Fiction books	408
Nonfiction books	88
Reading scheme books	25
Poetry books	30
Magazines, comics, etc.	21
Unreadable/no reply	26

The first, and most obviously striking, feature of the children's replies was the supremacy of fiction. This echoes the findings of both Whitehead (1977) and Ingham (1981) and is not, perhaps, terribly surprising. Looking at individual titles it seems that a wide range of exciting and lively fiction was actually being read in these junior classrooms.

The 20 teachers of these children all included amongst their aims in the teaching of reading the fostering of an enjoyment of reading and the encouragement of children to read a wide range of books.

Teacher 3: I want to make them independent readers who want to read and enjoy books.  
 Teacher 12: My aims? Enjoyment, widened horizons.

They also, mentioned in terms of the range of materials and resources they considered necessary to support their aims, the need to have available a wide range of books, by a variety of authors, at a variety of reading levels.

Certainly every classroom we visited in the course of this survey was stocked with a range of fiction books. Most, but by no means all, also had reading scheme books, some stored separately, some mixed in with the 'real books'. There was considerable variety in the ways in which the books were presented to the children, ranging from attractive and well displayed book areas to over-stuffed and disorganised book trolleys. Nevertheless, in all cases there were a variety of books on offer and, to judge from the range of books mentioned by the children, they appeared to be being used.

To list all the books mentioned by our sample of children would be unwieldy. Instead we shall look at two classes only in order to present a picture of the diversity of books which were being read. The titles listed by a class of 8 year olds in one city primary school are given in Figure 2 and those listed by the junior class in a small, remote, rural

school in Figure 3. A similar, wide variety of books was being read by every class within our survey but if we look at the lists in relation to their class teachers' responses we can begin to see how differing practices and views seem to influence the children's choice of books.

**Figure 2: Books currently being read by an 8-year-old class in a city primary school**

<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>
Paddington	Grandpa's Lamp
Dinner Ladies Don't Count	Fat Puss and Friends
Two Hats	Read it Yourself - Paws & Claws
Dead Letter Box	Dustbin Charlie
Jimmy Tag Along	The Enormous Crocodile
Dragon Rider	The Little Witch
Lindas Bike	The Spirit Of NIMH
Zat the Dog	The Horse and his Boy
Fat Puss and Friends	The B.F.G.
Grandpa Made a Lamp	Blue Pirate Sails
Cowboy Sam	Goodies and Baddies
What Katy Did	The Secret Seven
Speedy Fred	The Magic Finger
The Honeybone	The Three Pirates Meet (mentioned twice)
Bangers and Mash	My reading book
The Giant's Socks	Watership Down
Pugwash	
Roderick the Red	
Witch Tricks	
Stone Soup	

**Figure 3: Books currently being read by children in a rural primary school**

<b>Girls</b>	<b>Boys</b>
Age 7	Age 7
What Katy Did	War and Peas
The Storm	Little Colers (sic) Crime
	Arms and Armour
Age 8	War and Peas/Football crazy
3rd Bedtime Book: Enid Blyton	Sport/Arms and Armour
Superfudge: Judy Blume	The Big Stink: Sheila Lavelle
Age 9	Age 8
James the T.V. Star: Michael Hardcastle	Sam Short
War Horse: Michael Morpurgo	Ursula books
Age 10	Age 9
Harry's Dog	The Lighthouse Keepers Lunch
When Dust Jumped out on the Burglar	Friend and brothers/The snail
	How the Whale Became: Ted Hughes
Age 11	Staggers the snow man
Waiting of Anya: Michael Murpurgo	Eyewitness guide
Black Beauty: Anya Seaton	T. R. goes to school: Hazel Townsend ?

In the rural school the recently appointed teacher had removed an outdated reading scheme being used in the school when she arrived and had instead purchased a large number of 'real' books which were available within the class library for all the children. She had retained, within the class library, various books from some reading schemes which were mixed in with the 'real' books. The children had free access to all the books on offer and were reading a range, but no child appeared to be reading a scheme book.

In the city school a reading scheme was in operation for those children deemed to be in need of it (but the children were also permitted to choose a book for themselves). Some children therefore mentioned their reading scheme book when asked about what they had read yesterday. This is not surprising but perhaps of more concern is the fact that several of the children who were still reading a scheme book also chose that book as the book they liked to read best. It would be gratifying for the authors of these schemes to think this reflected a level of enjoyment and interest in the series but it seems more likely that this choice merely reflects a lack of knowledge of, or lack of interest in books. No children in the whole sample who were reading a 'real' book chose a scheme book as their 'best' book. It appears that once they have ceased reading 'scheme' books, children do not wish to return to them.

Across the whole group the choice of scheme books as best books by children still on a reading scheme was more likely to occur with younger children (7 and 8 year olds), again suggesting that lack of knowledge of alternatives may influence the decision. The 10 and 11 year old children who were still reading scheme books all mentioned non-scheme alternatives as their best reading. There is therefore some indication in our survey that the very children who, it could be argued, are most in need of exciting and stimulating books are the children most likely to choose from a narrow range of known scheme books. These children seem to need either active help and encouragement in selecting a wider range of books, or more opportunities to sample the range of books available to them. This survey would, in this regard, support the suggestion of Ingham (1981) that "if we want children to become familiar with a wide variety of authors and titles we need to make this choice available and accessible." (p.75)

### ***Influences upon children's reading***

There was evidence that the practice of individual teachers had a marked influence on what their children read. For example, whilst overall only 5% of children in the survey were reading poetry books, in one classroom a cluster of children were reading poetry. Their teacher mentioned in her interview the importance of poetry and six children in her class (20%) were actually reading poetry books (typically alongside another fiction book). Seven children within the class cited poetry books as the books they enjoyed reading most. All the poetry books mentioned by name were recent as opposed to traditional works and included such titles as *Gargling with Jelly* and *Please Mrs Butler*. This in turn reflected the range of poetry books on offer in the room and the poetry which this teacher tended to read to her class.

Another teacher (of a year 5 class) talked about the importance of picture books in his practice. He mentioned the importance of visual stimulus, the use of Information Technology to encourage children to use words and graphics together and he had

arranged a visit by a well known children's book illustrator. He also had a selection of picture books on display in his classroom. Again this interest was reflected in what his children were reading. Although older children in the survey sample did occasionally mention that they were reading a picture book, in this class of 10 year olds three picture books were currently being read and the children reading them were certainly not struggling readers. A further two children within the class went on to list picture books amongst their favourite type of reading. It seemed that the enthusiasm of this teacher and his acceptance of picture books as acceptable reading material for older children were reflected in the children's choice of books.

Further evidence of the importance of positive stimulus came from two classes in the survey who had each been visited by a children's author (coincidentally Michael Morpurgo in both cases.) In one village school our survey was conducted a good six months after his visit, yet three children out of the twenty two questioned were currently reading a Michael Morpurgo book and five cited him or one of his books as their best read. In the second class (a city school which he had visited three weeks before our survey) five out of twenty eight children were reading one of his books and nine claimed him or his books as their best read. In both classes the visit had been reinforced by the teachers, who had encouraged discussion of this author's books, had read one of them aloud to the class and had a range of his books available in the classroom. Authors, publishers and teachers will be pleased to see that such intensive input seems to have both immediate and lasting results.

There was evidence in the survey of other influences upon children's reading. There were many examples of books being mentioned in clusters. In several classes a book that was mentioned by one child would then be mentioned by several others. There do appear to be distinct class fashions in terms of book reading. For example, in one class of 11 year olds five children mentioned or were reading *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole* by Sue Townsend, whilst in other classes of 11 year olds it was not mentioned at all. In another class several children mentioned Asterix books, in another Jackson/Livingston Fighting Fantasy Gamebooks. There could be several possible reasons for such clusters. It might be that children recommend books to each other. Ingham (1981) certainly found a good deal of evidence of children discussing their reading with each other. The reason might be more sociological in that the reading of certain books becomes part of the shared experience of a friendship group. The teacher might stimulate an interest by her reading of particular books to children, this interest may be simply to do with availability, or it may arise from the popularity of certain TV programmes (there were, for example, a number of children who mentioned World Wrestling Federation magazines). We can only hypothesise from our data the possible nature of the influences but it is clear that children's choices can be influenced. This seems to suggest that part of the role of effective teachers is to provide positive influences through encouraging children to write and share book reviews, encouraging discussion of favourite books and offering children the experience of exciting and pleasurable books both on classroom shelves and as teacher-read stories. In our survey 103 of the 106 teachers read fiction regularly to their class and all 106 regarded it as a worthwhile activity.

### *"The literature under the desk"*

Just as our survey revealed evidence of practice having a positive influence on what was read so it was also evident both from what children read and from the teacher survey/interviews that there was a wide variety of practice when it came to reading that was actively discouraged in schools. Opinions on the value of comics and magazines of different kinds revealed wide variation in practice between schools and even between teachers in the same school (an observation which is not in the least new: see Hindle, 1971). In some schools comics were actively discouraged. For example, in one school the following exchange was observed during a class discussion on reading.

- Teacher: You can read anything during reading time. Anything you choose.  
Child: Can we read comics?  
Teacher: No. You know you're not allowed to have comics in school.  
Child: Why can't we read comics?  
Teacher: We've discussed it before. Mrs X (the headteacher) doesn't like you reading comics. She doesn't think they are worthwhile and anyway you'll read them at home anyway so we don't need them in school.

In the survey, teachers were asked about children reading comics. 31 teachers said they never used them and 35 teachers said they did use them. The remaining 40 said they used them very infrequently. Some interviewed teachers were positive in their views about comics.

- Teacher 2. Useful for encouraging reluctant readers. It helps with sequencing. It mixes visual and written.  
Teacher 16. It's an approachable and attractive way of presenting material.

Other teachers were more equivocal in their views.

- Teacher 1. It's better than nothing. Some are better than others. They're O.K. occasionally but I wouldn't encourage them as anything more than light relief.

However, although 71 teachers never, or barely, used comics, only eleven of these thought they were not useful at all in developing reading. 73 teachers thought them quite useful or very useful. The remaining 22 teachers were not sure about the usefulness of comics. Clearly there is still controversy over the place of such reading materials in school which some teachers resolve by not using them. In the schools in which comics were permitted the children included them in their lists of their current reading but, interestingly, they appeared to be no more popular than other kinds of reading materials. Although Whitehead (1977) includes the prevalence of comics among a list of factors which may have led to a decline in children's book reading, the argument that if children are allowed to read comics in school they will read little else does not seem to be borne out by our results. In one school where comics were

permitted only eleven out of the 101 children surveyed were reading comics and magazines. Two were reading Nintendo magazines, two computer or game instruction manuals, one a computer magazine, two World Wrestling Federation magazines, one the Beano and one Bella magazine. When asked what they liked reading best only 13 children in this particular school and 5% of the children in the whole sample mentioned comics and magazines including Women's Own, Fast Forward, Look In, World Wrestling Federation, Beano, sticker albums, computer magazines, martial arts magazines, cricket and fishing magazines and pop magazines. For many of these children a comic or magazine was mentioned alongside other reading.

Comics and magazines appeared to be a supplement to books rather than a replacement for them and they often seemed to relate directly to a child's interests. For example, two older boys still on reading scheme books mentioned computer magazines as their favourite reading. They were, however, at a school that did not permit children to read comics and magazines in school time. The question might be asked as to whether, by ignoring their preferred reading material, an opportunity was being missed here to motivate some struggling readers? Perhaps schools that do ban comics and magazines need to look closely at the rationale behind such a policy. Our survey shows little evidence that comics swamp books.

### *Children's reading choices*

Looking at the whole range of books mentioned it was little surprise to find that Roald Dahl was the author being read by the greatest number of children (25 out of 464 children). This popularity spanned gender and age range. The next most mentioned author was Enid Blyton (15/464). Again she was read by both boys and girls but mainly by the younger children. These same authors emerged as the most popular among children in Ingham's (1981) survey, where, however, their order of popularity was reversed. In the Whitehead (1977) survey, Enid Blyton was the most popular author by a very long way. (Interestingly, Whitehead includes Blyton among his list of "juvenile 'non-quality' narrative authors", whereas Dahl is listed in the "juvenile 'quality' narrative" sector.) The books of many other authors were being read by several children: for example, Dick King-Smith, Judy Blume, Michael Morpurgo, Bernard Ashley, John Ryan, the Ahlbergs, J.R.R. Tolkien, Ian Serrailier, Goscinny & Uderzo, Raymond Briggs, Colin Dann, Terry Pratchett, Michael Foreman, Sue Townsend, C.S. Lewis, Shirley Hughes, Michael Rosen, Hazel Townsend, and Jill Murphy. A further vast range of authors was being read by individual children. Of the 'popular' authors listed above only Blyton, Serrailier, Tolkien and Lewis featured in the Whitehead survey and only these four plus Judy Blume and Goscinny & Uderzo (Asterix) were mentioned by Ingham.

It was reassuring to observe, in the light of criticism often levelled at teachers by the popular press, that the traditional children classics are still being read in our primary classrooms. The belief that the canon of classic children's literature is no longer read is not borne out by our sample. We found, for example, children reading *What Katy Did*, *The Secret Garden*, *Alice In Wonderland*, *Black Beauty*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Treasure Island*, *The Jungle Book*, *The Railway Children*, and *The Box of Delights* as well as more recent classics such as *Winnie the Pooh*, *Paddington*, *The Hobbit*,



Watership Down, Lord of the Flies, The Iron Man and The Silver Sword to name but a few.

The books listed by children as their 'best' reading showed a similar range. Some children chose more than one book but encouragingly only one child in 464 stated that he did not have a 'best' read. Most children had clear ideas on what they liked to read. 361 children chose fiction books, some of these mentioning individual books and others individual authors. Again some clear favourites emerged and these are listed in Figure 4. There were 31 other individually named fiction authors or books.

**Figure 4: The popularity of named authors**

Author	Number of children mentioning
Roald Dahl	102
Enid Blyton	42
Michael Morpurgo	13
Steve Jackson/Ian Livingston	12
Dick King Smith	7
Hazel Townsend	6
C.S.Lewis	5
Judy Blume	5

Many children, however, specified a genre of book rather than a specific text. The fiction genres specified by more than one child included adventure stories (mentioned by 24 children), ghost/spooky books (9), murder/detective (9), horror (8) and fairy tales (5). Other children specified: magazines (18 children), poetry books (20), reading scheme books (11). Four children claimed to like all books, one child liked books at home and one specified the bible.

The range of genres mentioned increased with age. For example in one school the 7 year old class used the genre terms: adventure books, fairy tales, poetry, mystery books, animal books and myths and legends. The 11 year olds did not mention fairy tales or myths and legends but their list had grown to include adventure, poetry, mystery, horse and pony books, horror, funny, jokes, teenage books, murder, fantasy, war, hobby books and choose your own adventure books. Their knowledge of the types of genre available seemed considerably greater. This pattern was repeated in other schools, reflecting children's widening experience of books as they grew older.

### **Some implications for teachers**

Several implications for teachers of junior children have already been noted during our discussion of the survey. Here we shall touch briefly on one or two.

One of the major messages arising from a look at what children are reading and choosing to read is the vital importance of offering them a wide range of texts. When we find the members of one year 3 class reading texts of such difficulty range as Roderick the Red and Watership Down, of such a range of maturity levels as What Katy Did and Pugwash and with such a range of interests and favourite authors, it becomes

clear that reliance on one reading scheme cannot hope to satisfy such needs. Only by providing access to an extensive variety of books are teachers likely to produce the kind of reader who says, "Now I can choose what I read, where I stop and start what I think is nicest to read.....I read every day as much as possible...." (Girl, Age 11 years).

A second issue concerns the extent to which teachers can affect the reading interests and experiences of their children. Our survey has provided clear evidence that children are susceptible to influence in their reading, influence which might come from their peers, their teachers or external sources. Teachers can certainly have some positive impact upon the first two of these sources and can mediate the third. There is a variety of ways in which teachers can encourage their pupils to read certain kinds of texts. They can, for example, make these texts the focus of classroom activities by reading from them to the children, by discussing them with children and by making them the starting point for thematic work of various kinds.

A third issue revolves around whether or not any of the findings we report in this paper are surprising to teachers. We have presented information about children's reading interests and experiences across a number of classes yet it seems to us that such information about their own classes is vital to individual teachers as they attempt to develop and extend their children's reading. If teachers do not know the reading preferences and diet of their own children, they cannot be in the best position to advise, persuade and stimulate these children to make the most appropriate reading choices. This does not mean that teachers must administer the questionnaire we have used to their classes, although we would venture to suggest that the results would be revealing and useful. There are other strategies available for monitoring children's reading, chief amongst them being the child-kept reading log or diary. Using such a record can not only enable teachers to keep track of what individual children are reading, but also supply the information necessary to the formation of book discussion groups and other follow-up activities. The reading log can only serve in this way, of course, if children are sufficiently confident in their teacher's use of it to report their reading preferences accurately. If children are allowed freedom to express their reading likes and dislikes, then this needs to be respected by their teachers.

We are very aware, of course, that this survey relates only to the reading interests expressed by children in one part of Britain. We would be very glad to hear of comparative studies from other parts of the country and the world. There is much to be gained by such sharing of "the state of reading" worldwide.

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