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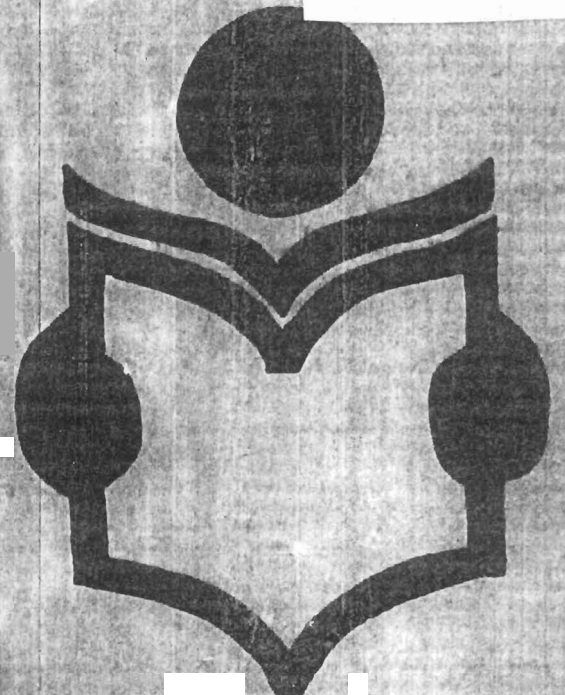
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The Influence of Economic Status on the Reading Preferences of Nigerian Primary Pupils

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Introduction

Conclusive evidence that socio-economic status, among other factors, affects the book choices of young readers has so far eluded reading comprehension researchers. Thus, the quest still goes on for a statistically valid instrument that may be used as a measure of reading preferences. Through such investigation, an accurate reading interest scale might be provided. Accordingly, the present study sets out to determine the effect of social status on the book selections of children while employing a non-verbal test instrument in the form of pictures.

With similar purpose of mind, previous research studies have sought to find reading interest categories through interest inventories (Kottmeyer, 1958; Jordan, 1971), analyzing frequency of library selections (Fetuga & James, 1980), relating high frequency topics extracted from free discussion to book interests (Byers, 1964), administering attitude scales in conjunction with book scanning (Palmer & Palmer, 1983) and the use of non-verbal, non-reading evaluations (Ford & Koplyay, 1968; and McNinch, 1971).

In contrast, the present study is a further modification of the Ford & Koplyay (1968) strategy and the McNinch (1971) investigation. In addition to the previous research methods used, the number of preference categories has been increased as recommended by McNinch. Moreover, the effect of culture on reading preference has been incorporated into the study. Though the bulk of research found in the literature has examined Black and White American children or African children in general groupings without considering level of development or economic status as variables, the present paper concentrates on low and high-income primary two and primary six Nigerians readers.

Literature Review

Establishing the reading preferences of children has not resulted in a definitive list of areas of interest as a survey of previous research work will indicate. For that reason, this review will examine three research methods: interest inventory, analysis of library selections and analysis of free discussion topics.

Perhaps the observation that McNinch made of the Ford & Koplyay study that basic manageable categories have not been obtained, still holds. Otherwise, a comparison of these studies would provide precise research statements about the books children like to read.

The first of these techniques to be examined is the interest inventory method as used by Jordan (1971). Form I students (seventh grade) in Sierra Leone were asked to imagine that they could read books for pleasure and to indicate the category in order of preference. Jordan's survey was by location and story type. The results revealed that the subjects preferred to read stories with the setting first, in Sierra Leone; second, in the rest of the world; third, in the rest of Africa.

Furthermore, adventure stories topped the list of story type followed by history, family life and folk tales. Religion and animals were listed as least preferred. Among the 'don't want to read' selections were stories about children, crime, information and travel.

Although the analysis of library borrowing habits forms a different method of assessing book preference than that of the Jordan study, the Fetuga & James (1980) data revealed similar results in some areas. Fetuga & James analysed the primary record cards for borrowing library books of 1,886 Nigerian primary school children. A frequency count was compiled for the choices in eleven categories. Consequently, Fetuga & James indicate data similar to the Jordan study. Both studies found a strong preference for family life stories among African children.

Besides this, both studies revealed different, but strong degrees of preference for folk tales. Also, adventure stories appear on the lists of both studies. Nonetheless, adventure is one of the least preferred story types in the Fetuga & James data while adventure is the most frequently selected story type for the Jordan study.

A third type of assessment method is the analysis of free discussion topics. Byers (1964) looked at the type of topics that interest white American first graders as revealed during morning sharing periods of free discussion. Specifically, she found young children's order of interest preference to be science and nature, living things (animals and insects), possessions, personal experiences and family and friends. The least liked topics in rank order were: recreational activities, books, clothing and community events or events concerning friends.

By way of comparisons, the similarities between this study and the Fetuga & James and the Jordan investigations are in the preferences for topics about animals and family and friends. However, the Byers study revealed family and friends as having weak preference. In contrast, African children give family life high priority.

In summary, a comparison of the six lists of reading preferences does not reveal conclusive evidence about what low and high-income children, Black or White, prefer to reading. Although a non-verbal means of testing appears more beneficial than other test procedures, it does not seem to possess the needed reliability for its use as a broad research tool (McNinch, 1971). It does seem, as McNinch points out, that the categories used by all researchers are too broad, even in the McNinch study itself.

• For this purpose, the present study has not only increased the number of categories, but has also made them specific by including the variable of culture.

Methodology

Three hundred and twenty-seven primary two and six pupils attending a high socio-economic status university primary school in Ile-Ife, Nigeria, were used for the study. In addition, three hundred and thirty-three primary two and six pupils were randomly selected from low socio-economic schools in Ile-Ife Township. The subjects were tested to find their preferences of stories according to economic level. Also, the study sought to find the influence of culture on these choices.

The economic status of the schools was determined by the academic qualifications of the teachers employed. Other determining factors were the quality and availability of teaching facilities, the amount paid as fees by the parents and the type of snacks consumed by the pupils.

The university school is located within the university campus. More than seven-eighths of its pupils used for the study indicated that their parents were teachers in various academic fields. The majority of the pupils of the township schools indicated that their parents were engaged in peasant farming or petty trading.

The data was collected by using a set of twenty-two coloured visual illustrations. These were produced by a Nigerian lecturer in Fine Arts. The theme of the visuals covered animals, things, Nigerian and foreign family life, magic, Nigerian and foreign culture, Nigerian and foreign people, Nigerian and foreign peer relationships and humor.

The illustrations were produced one each on bright cardboard sheets of 120 grams. The size of each illustration was 5½" x 7½". They were mounted on blue cardboard sheets with a margin of ½" all around. The margins were considered very necessary for the enhancement of the visuals. Thus, the visuals were of the movable type used in the McNinch study.

The reliability and validity of the visuals were verified. A group of five professional staff of Obafemi Awolowo University in the area of graphic design considered the instruments valid and reliable for the exercise after minor adjustments were made. In addition, five randomly selected subjects between the ages of seven and twelve who attended the University school and five subjects from the local schools were exposed to the visuals two weeks before the actual exercise was carried out.

Procedure

The twenty-two visual illustrations were spread out on a large table in the school. The subjects were asked to choose any picture they would like to read more about in a book. There was no interference from the researcher that would influence the choices of the subject.

A frequency count of the selections was made and analyzed using chi-square.

Results

Chi-square analysis of the frequency distribution of choices for each of the fifteen categories revealed that the economic level of the reader has a strong influence on the type of story choices made by both primary two pupils and primary six pupils. In addition, culture plays a role in story selection. A further breakdown of the data obtains a list of specific story preferences of the subjects according to grade level, socio-economic status and cultural relevance.

Thus, results show that low-income primary two children expressed interest in thirteen of the fifteen categories. High interest story types were those about the Nigerian family (first choice), animals (second choice) and fairly tales (third choice). By this token, the McNinch results that indicate wild animals, fairly tales and peer and community relationships as the first three choices of Black American children are substantiated. The only difference is that McNinch's third choice becomes the first choice of the Nigerian child. In addition, the reading preferences of the low-income primary two child indicate moderate interest for Nigerian culture, foreign family life and

Nigerian people. At the same time, these subjects had the same low interest level (7%) for the 'things' category and Nigerian school life. Very little interest was shown for foreign school life, foreign peer relationships, magic, foreign people, and foreign culture. There was no interest in Nigerian peer relationships or humor. It should be noted that this finding is supported by Jordan's study in which the subjects expressed little interest in reading about children.

A comparison of low-income results with the preferences of high-income primary two children reveal a lack of similarities in regard to the top three choices. High-income primary two children have a high interest in animals (first choice), things (second choice), and foreign culture (third choice). Their only common interest with their low-income partners is a preference for stories about animals.

This list is dissimilar to the preference categories presented in the literature. However, there is a minor similarity to the Jordan finding that African students prefer to read stories whose setting is in an overseas country. This might explain the high-income primary six child's interest in foreign culture.

Primary two high-income children displayed moderate interest, like their counterparts, in the foreign family category. They also showed a moderate liking for fairy tales. Also, primary two high-income children had low interest in culture related stories in the following categories: Nigerian family, Nigerian culture and Nigerian people. However, they did have low preference for foreign school life story types. These four categories shared a common frequency percentage of seven percent.

While very little interest was held for magic, foreign and Nigerian peers, foreign people, humor and Nigerian school life, these subjects, unlike the low-income group, showed reading interest in all of the fifteen categories. The weak interest in peer groups displayed by the high-income primary two once again validates the Jordan data. Both high and low-income groups shared a little interest rating in the categories of foreign peers, magic and foreign people.

The second part of the study shows a low-income primary six interest in animals. It appears that the primary two interest in this category is maintained throughout the primary years. However, this interest in animals has become stronger since it here replaces the primary two story preference of Nigerian family life as the number one choice. Thus, the low-income primary six high interest areas are animals (first choice).

Concerning the high-income primary six choices, their preferences remain the same as for primary two in regard to the first and second choices only. The Nigerian family life category replaces the primary two choice of foreign culture as the third choice. In sum, the story preferences for high-income primary six pupils are: animals (first choice), things (second choice), and Nigerian family life (third choice). A strong fourth choice is also evidenced, that of Nigerian people.

A point of interest in the results is that interest in fairy tales appears to wane for both groups in primary six. Though the interest level drops from third position to fifth position for the low-income group, the high-income group seems to lose interest almost totally.

Also, the low-income primary six group displayed moderate interest in fairy tales, Nigerian family life and Nigerian people while the high-income group had moderate interest in foreign and Nigerian culture. All remaining categories drew little or no interest from both groups.

Concerning the influence of cultural background on story preference, the results reveal that Nigerian children like to read stories that are culture related. However, the low-income group at both grade levels selected story types with a culture based background more often than the high-income group.

That is to say, of the first eight preferences of low-income primary two children, four choices reflected culture based stories. In contrast, the high-income primary two group made three culture based selections, five selections that were foreign based and one choice related to a neutral category.

In addition, four of the first seven primary six low-income choices were for culture related stories. Of the first six high-income choices for the low-income primary six group, half were culture based.

Discussion

The story preferences for low and high-income primary pupils are very different. The low-income primary two child has high interest in fairy tales and in stories that focus on animals. However, it appears that this low-income Nigerian child loves to read about the Nigerian family above all else. This is his first choice and it is represented by a comparatively double strength frequency percentage (18%). While this child continued to select story types related to his culture, he still gave priority to family life even when the stories were foreign in nature. In general, the least preferred stories for this group were foreign ones. Still, the low-income child does not like reading about his Nigerian peers, nor does he like stories of a humorous nature.

In contrast, the choices of the primary two high-income group in no way resemble those made by the low-income group in regard to the top three choices. There is only one common interest, animal stories. Yet, the high-income group at this level had a proclivity for things foreign that was not evident in the low-income group. The Jordan study that found an African preference for stories with an overseas setting, may explain this. The high-income child may be exposed to foreign culture more often and thus wish to read about it more.

At the same time, the Jordan study reveals the African child's lack of interest in reading about other children. Likewise the primary two high-income group had low interest in reading about their Nigerian peers.

In regard to primary six, the low-income child's interest in animals is maintained from primary two. However, this new interest in animals replaces the primary two child's preference for the Nigerian family category as the number one choice. Also, the high-income primary six child has the animals and 'things' categories as the first and second choice as does the high-income primary two child. Nevertheless, the third choice is replaced with the Nigerian family category. Even though the preference lists for primary two are dissimilar except for the animals category, the preference lists for both

groups at the primary six grade levels are similar. Both have animals and "things" among their first three choices. The difference is between the second choice of Nigerian culture for the low-income group and the third choice of the Nigerian family category for the high-income group.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that socio-economic status has a strong influence on the story preferences of Nigerian school children. Culture also has an effect. The low-income primary two child likes to read about Nigerian family life, animals and fairy tales. On the other hand, the high-income primary two child leans toward animals, 'things', and foreign based story types.

Where the primary two choices are very different when compared by economic level, the economic levels are very similar at primary six. At this stage, both economic levels enjoy animals and 'things.' Both groups are drawn to culture related stories as evidenced by the low-income choice of Nigerian culture and the high-income choice of Nigerian family life.

Culture was also found to affect story preferences. The low-income group at both grade levels selected based story types more than the high-income group. The primary two high-income child liked to read foreign based stories best. However, high-income interest for foreign and culture based stories were divided evenly in primary six. Further, the interest in fairy tales appears to decrease for both groups in primary six. The present findings for the primary six grade level do not generally correlate with the overseas data. As a result, the quest for conclusive evidence about reading preferences must still go on.

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