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Fifth Graders Talk about Leisure Reading: a Series of Focus Groups

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Fifth Graders Talk About Leisure Reading:
A Series of Focus Groups

Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Committee of the
Department of Education and Human Development
State University of New York
College at Brockport
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master in Science in Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to discover the attitudes, behaviors and interests of fifth grade students concerning leisure time reading.

The subjects consisted of nine focus groups of five students each (n=45) selected from fifth grade classes within Monroe County school districts. The schools were stratified by location including urban, suburban, and rural environments. Student selection was made by classroom teachers based on a variety of reading abilities and gender. Focus groups were interviewed regarding their leisure time reading habits, interests and behaviors. Group responses were then analyzed qualitatively and grouped into various categories.

While the results did indicate a decline in leisure time reading, it was apparent that students in the fifth grade know what types of materials they enjoy reading, when they choose to read. Television viewing was reported as a favorite activity, as well as playing sports and spending time with friends. Reading was enjoyed most by suburban fifth graders. Magazines were the favorite medium for all groups of students, followed by books. Most read subjects included sports, humor, romance, fantasy and mystery. Higher ability readers tended to read more and have more confidence, while lower ability students preferred other activities. Those students who were read to as young children also reported more positive attitudes than those students not read to.

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Chapter I

Statement of the Problem

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the attitudes behaviors and interests of fifth grade students concerning leisure time reading.

Questions to be Answered

1. What will fifth grade students from various types of instructional environments say about their interests, attitudes and behaviors regarding leisure time reading?
2. Will any patterns of preferred subjects of literature emerge? If so, what subjects do fifth graders' enjoy reading about?
3. What types of reading materials are fifth grade students most interested in (e.g., books, magazines, manuals)?

Need for the Study

What will fifth grade students tell you about their free time reading habits? The focus of this study uncovered ideas straight from the mouths of fifth graders.

A global educational concern was the falling standardized test scores. Many school districts were looking into ways to combat this steady decline. Reading constituents and specialists were being enlisted to determine the best course of action to take. Had anyone stopped to ask the students? As with a trip to the doctor, a simple diagnostic question should be used, "What's the matter?"

Once the data were obtained, educators, parents, librarians, authors and publishers could tailor high interest materials to suit the student's personal tastes. This alone could make a positive impact on the student as an individual, as well as acknowledge the student's personal tastes, interests and attitudes.

Much could be gained by knowing how fifth grade students feel about leisure time reading. Many prior studies have indicated that students who read outside of school for pleasure were the better readers. It followed that when one

enjoyed an activity, one would work hard to excel at it. Reading, as with other activities can be practiced, and improvement can be attained.

Research has shown that as students approach the fifth grade their ideas toward leisure reading became more negative. Possible suggestions for this change included an increase in academic requirements for reading, as well as additional extracurricular interests. Only the most avid readers continued to pursue pleasure reading outside of school. In order to increase the number of students who stayed involved with reading for pleasure, it was necessary to uncover the current perceptions of fifth graders regarding their reading interests.

The implications of this study could be used by parents, teachers, librarians, authors, publishers, and students themselves. Knowing what the interests and behaviors of fifth graders are would be helpful when recommending leisure time reading choices. Gaining insight into the attitudes of fifth grade students towards reading would enable authors and publishers to select topics which students in this age group already may be interested in. This would increase the number of high interest books available to fifth graders for

leisure reading.

This study uncovered what focus groups of fifth graders offered concerning leisure time reading. What topics do fifth graders enjoy reading about? How do they feel about series books? How do they choose the books they read? Are fifth graders reading for pleasure? Why do they read? Do fifth grade students see the value of reading? Because of the open-ended nature of a focus group, many other questions were also discovered and answered.

Definition of Terms

Leisure Reading/Pleasure Reading: Reading as a choice to fill time otherwise unoccupied.

Attitude: A manner showing one's feelings, thoughts, or opinions.

Behavior: The habits one demonstrates in relation to an event or happening.

Interest: Having a curiosity towards an event or happening.

Limitations of the Study

The approach to attitude assessment had inherent limitations and further investigation using other paradigms is needed to adequately understand the complex processes through which children acquire attitudes towards reading.

The nature of qualitative research left room for creativity with data collection. The data for this study were collected through the use of focus groups. Within an adult population, focus groups are used regularly to gain insights into various feelings and beliefs; however, adults are usually more experienced at vocalizing their thoughts than children are. It was very important that the researcher be a facilitator in this process so as not to skew the meanings of student responses. Being that there are no "cut and dried" answers to use as data, the researcher also questioned each group thoroughly to be sure that the students' true meaning was achieved.

Since the researcher conducted all of the interviews, the path of questioning was consistent; despite that, given the fact that different groups took different directions lead to new developments as new groups were encountered. Not all

focus groups were asked to address all topics which arose within other groups.

Student selection for the focus groups was based upon teacher recommendations for balanced groups of boys versus girls, with a range of reading abilities. The fact that instructional techniques could influence attitudes at times was a potential source of variance. Additionally, only fifteen students from each school were questioned. This allowed the data collection to represent urban, suburban, and rural educational environments, but was a rather small sampling overall.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the attitudes, behaviors and interests of fifth grade students concerning leisure time reading.

Volumes of research have been conducted concerning the ideas which fifth grade students had towards leisure time reading. Some studies stated that fifth graders were avid pleasure readers, and others argued that point. There also have been various programs implemented to increase fifth graders' interest in free time reading. Pressure from school districts to increase reading scores on standardized tests has been a motivating factor in implementing leisure reading during school time. Because fifth graders had more time allotted for reading, teachers, parents, authors and publishers were curious to find out what topics were of interest to that age group.

Non-Reading Activities

A number of studies discovered that fifth grade students had negative attitudes towards leisure reading. This research evidence was documented in various studies including the work of Bowermaster (1976), Lange (1994), and Varley (1995). McEady-Gillead (1989, p. 10) went further to conclude that, "the out-of-school activity ranked highest according to the survey is 'watch T.V.' at a response frequency of 80% while reading ranked fifth with a frequency of 50%." Jones (1983) added that, "few (students) noted that they actually picked up a book during their free time" (p. 8). Greaney's (1980) research confirmed this trend, "Of the nine major leisure categories, reading (based on number of minutes) ranked seventh on both mean and median rankings. Overall, 5.4% of leisure time was spent reading" (p. 345).

A possible explanation for these findings was described in a study conducted by Lange (1994). He stated that, "several possible causes existed for the lack of time students spent in leisure reading...children were being attracted regularly by

modern technology, distractions from home, and frequently had no one with whom to share books” (p. 21). Moffitt and Wartella’s (1992) research concerning the leisure time activities of youths pointed to other activities. She stated that, “rather than turning to new mass media or popular culture forms, socializing with friends and participating in sports remain the favorite leisure pursuits of adolescents...” (p. 1). Morrow (1983) discovered that student interest in leisure reading was greater if they watched less T.V. and had books available at home.

This picture of the overall negative trend in reading attitude has led to the birth of the term *aliteracy*. McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) define this term as, “poor attitude may occasion a choice not to read when other options exist” (p. 934). Neuman (1986) stated it simpler yet, “Aliterate persons know how to read but choose not to” (p. 335).

Incentives Offered in Schools

Because many researchers were finding a decline in fifth graders’ leisure reading, schools began offering new programs

and incentives to students who completed more books. When it was found that external incentives enhanced reading performance, educators began to offer such rewards on a frequent basis (Feldmann & Blom, 1981). There were also new programs generated to increase student interest in pleasure reading. One of these programs, "Paperback Pizzazz," was studied by McCarthy (1993). This program allowed students to read high interest novels and share them with friends. It was successful in that students were reading more; however it later became an academic requirement to fulfill curriculum needs. By making pleasure reading required for school, it could no longer really be regarded as pleasure reading. Additionally, students involved in such incentive programs became confused by the differentiation between academic reading and pleasure reading. Evidence of another study suggested that many of these students, whose sole exposure to reading was through stories in the basal readers encountered in most schools, were not likely to develop much interest in reading (Wilson and others, 1986).

The Other Side - Readers

Other researchers found contradicting results and went as far as to say that fifth grade students were reading for pleasure on a large scale. Kaiser (1995) found that if a reading related to the interests and concerns of the age group, then students would eagerly engage in leisure reading.

Consequently, new research and techniques in bibliotherapy have arose. Bibliotherapy is the philosophy of using books with themes which relate directly to the reader in order to address similar types of problems in the reader's life. This helps the reader to open up to the fact that he or she is not unusual, and others have had like problems or concerns.

Koskinen (1995) found that school-home reading programs proved to increase children's interest, fluency, and reading independence. Greaney (1980) explained this increase of interest by stating, "it is reasonable to expect that the amount of leisure time spent reading is related to availability of reading material. This material may come from a variety of sources, including...personal purchases and gifts" (p. 342).

Hansen (1969) found that children from homes with a

supportive literary environment tended to enjoy reading more. Results from a study by Williams (1989) found that students who spent a great deal of time reading enjoyed it more and were read to as young children. Tchudi (1985) went further to state that the way one is raised affects one's responses to literature due to one's background knowledge. Other fifth graders reported that reading was an important part of their lives and enjoyed reading materials that related to their own lives. Morawski and Brunhuber (1993) concluded that individual perceptions of readers greatly influenced positive reading development. When topics related directly to the reader, their perceptions improved. Jones (1983) indicated that, "Fifth grade students like to read a great deal and they most enjoyed reading mysteries and humorous books" (p. 5).

Fifth Graders' Subjects of Choice

This brought up the behavioral question, "If given the choice, what were fifth graders reading in their leisure time?" Galda (1982) reported that different types of literature elicited varied responses from students. When given the

opportunity to make their own selections, many fifth grade students chose books or series that dealt with growing up, humor, mystery, animals, sports and sports biographies, friends, and school life (Lawson, 1972; Stevens, 1981). There were also reports that boys tended to react favorably to the category of science and health. Girls had a significantly high positive preference towards realistic fiction and a significantly negative response to science and health (Brown, 1971). A more recent study indicated that fifth graders read approximately thirteen books per year and, in descending order, were interested in teen issues, romance, mystery, horror, fantasy, and science fiction. Interestingly, with one exception, the romance readers were girls, and also with just one exception, science fiction readers were boys. It was also noted that girls read two books for every book read by boys (Traw, 1993). Greaney (1980) went further to include, "pupils devoted an average of 5.4 per cent of available leisure time to reading for leisure" (p 337). The specific areas of interest in his study determined that substantially more time was devoted to book than to comic book reading while little time

was spent reading newspapers.

Reading Ability

The research has demonstrated that better readers tended to be avid leisure time readers. Students spent their free time engaged in activities that came easily to them. Pleasure readers liked reading, hence they scored higher on reading related tests than did students involved in extracurricular activities other than reading (Borgdorf, 1976; Stevens, 1980; Walker, 1979).

Results of one study revealed that higher interest materials significantly facilitated the reading comprehension of higher ability students, but had little effect on lower and middle ability students (Stevens, 1980). McKenna, Kear and Ellsworth (1995) confirmed this idea, "the trend toward more negative recreational attitudes was clearly related to ability and was steepest for least able readers" (p. 935). It was natural to predict that poorer readers, who have reason to experience frustrating outcomes, tended to harbor more negative attitudes than better readers.

Because the higher ability students were reading more outside of school, their exposure to various vocabulary and references were increased. This, balanced with their positive attitude towards reading, made them more successful students. It seemed obvious that by enticing more low and middle ability level students to read would help them to increase their scores on reading inventories. This was the idea that gave birth to the abundance of varied reading programs available to schools today.

Conclusion to Prior Research

“The development of reading skills and the nurturance of reading as a lifelong activity continue to be challenging goals for reading professionals” (Neuman, 1986, p. 335). By questioning students regarding their attitudes, interests, and behaviors: (1) educators may have better ideas about how to meet the needs of their students; (2) authors will be able to write about subjects pertaining to the preferences of fifth grade students; (3) publishers will accept more manuscripts dealing with the ideas and concerns of this age group; and (4)

parents and relatives of fifth grade students will encourage leisure time reading as an acceptable choice, and provide high interest materials to their children.

Chapter III

Design of the Study

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the attitudes, behaviors and interests of fifth grade students concerning leisure time reading.

Questions to be Answered

1. What will fifth grade students from various types of instructional environments say about their interests, attitudes and behaviors regarding leisure time reading?
2. Will any patterns of preferred subjects of literature emerge? If so, what subjects do fifth graders enjoy reading about?
3. What types of reading materials are fifth grade students most interested in (e.g. books, magazines, manuals)?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects consisted of nine focus groups of five students each (n=45) selected from fifth grade classes in Monroe County school districts. The schools were stratified by location including urban (n=15), suburban (n=15), and rural (n=15) environments. Student selection was made by classroom teachers based on a variety of reading abilities and gender.

Materials

A list of possible conversation starters and open-ended sentences were used to elicit responses which highlighted the attitudes and behaviors of fifth grade students concerning leisure reading (Appendix A).

A tape recorder was used to capture the responses of the focus groups.

Procedures

The focus group was interviewed through a series of round table discussions to probe their ideas concerning their attitudes, interests and behaviors towards leisure time reading. The interviewer asked various questions designed to elicit responses that required the subjects to discuss their current reading practices as well as their general attitudes towards pleasure reading. There was also questions relating to selection of leisure time reading materials and activities other than reading that the participants enjoy in their free time.

The following paragraph opened each focus group so that students were comfortable giving their true responses, without fear of being judged by their teachers or the researcher:

"I am going to ask you some questions about free choice reading (leisure reading). It is very important that you please answer me honestly because I am using this conversation for a graduate college project. I will not

use your names in my project, just your ideas about reading. I will also never discuss your answers with your teachers. If they ask, I would only tell them about the ideas we talked about, and not give any names of who said what. I have a tape recorder running so that I may concentrate on what you are saying, rather than taking notes. Please talk one at a time so that I will be able to hear what is recorded."

Analysis of Data

The entire content of the nine focus groups was reviewed, analyzed and used as data for this study. Selected verbal responses were compiled and transcribed and presented as supportive data. These selected responses were chosen for the following reasons: (1) they were representative of the sample; (2) they were unusually expressive or informative; or (3) they were thought to be unique. The data will be analyzed qualitatively to discover how fifth grade students view leisure reading.

Chapter IV

Analysis of Data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the attitudes, behaviors and interests of fifth grade students concerning leisure time reading.

This chapter presents the qualitative descriptive data collected from nine focus groups (n=45) concerning the leisure time reading attitudes, interests, and behaviors of fifth grade students. Students were identified by number as to secure their anonymity. Schools were simply classified as urban, suburban or rural.

Data from Urban Environment School

All three focus groups, of five students each, were in full attendance (n=15). There were no questions after the introductory paragraph was read. It is reported that all fifteen students were eager to partake in the questioning, and were generally relaxed in appearance.

Do you read in your free time?

Student 3: "I enjoy reading when I am alone more than in school. I can concentrate better when it is quiet."

Student 5: "Yeah, me too." It's like, too hard to hear yourself in school."

Student 8: "My teacher don't let me bring in fun stuff to read."

Student 11: "It's not as easy to read in school for fun. Teachers make you read a lot. That's not as fun as...reading with friends."

From these initial responses it became clear that there were numerous variables to contend with when questioning students of varying classroom environments. It appeared at that time that the students enjoyed reading, but ironically did not feel the classroom environment was conducive to that activity.

So where do you like to read?

Student 1: "At home, when it's quiet enough."

Student 4: "I have a place that I like to read at home...in my closet with a night light on."

Student 13: "I just like to read in bed."

Student 14: "I like that place too."

The places reported most included: at home, in bed, on the couch, outside, in a quiet corner of the classroom, and at other peoples' homes (e.g., friends, aunts, grandmas).

How often do you read?

The responses to that question produced a wide range of time spent reading. The average time from the three groups was 1/2 an hour a day, outside of school.

Tell me how you feel about free time reading.

Student 2: "I feel good about reading alone, but not in front of the class. I understand more alone. If I don't know words, my mom tells me."

Student 4: "I like to read, if I like the book. If I don't, I don't like it."

Student 5: "I feel bad when I don't know words in school. On my own it's O.K."

Student 7: "I feel that free time reading is good if everyone reads, not just some people. I like when my family reads too."

Student 12: "I feel good when I read alone."

Again, a large portion of responses pointed to a strong preference for quiet or private reading areas. It seems a great number of urban students were intimidated to read in front of a class, or their teachers. Also, subject matter became an evident motivation. If students were interested in a book, they were more likely to respond positively, and feel better.

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

Student 8: "I don't read good, so I don't like it. If I did it better, like my friend, I might like it more, but I don't."

This was the only negative response. It was becoming obvious that this student was a non-reader, although he did mention that he may like reading, if he could read like his friend. He apparently saw value in reading on some level. The rest of the students reported that they enjoyed leisure time reading to some degree.

What type of materials do you enjoy reading (e.g. books, magazines)?

Student 3: "I love kid's magazines like *Sassy*, and *YM (Young Miss)*."

Student 5: "And I like *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and *Mad*."

Student 7: "I like horse and cat magazines best."

Student 8: "Dirt bike magazines, and cars."

Student 9: "I read series books like *Goosebumps* and other mystery books like that."

Student 10: "Books about stuff I like is what I read. I like animals and stuff that doesn't really happen best."

"*Fantasy?*"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Student 11: "I like animal books, and books about real life, like when people have problems or parents get divorced."

Student 15: "That is for girls (Responding to Student 11). I like scary books, or science fiction. Those are good books."

This question elicited numerous responses. It was the easiest question for them to answer. Even students who did not particularly enjoy reading as much, knew what they liked to read. Gender began to play an important role in selection of materials. Girls preferred animals, real life stories, and teen romance. Boys tended to be directed towards sports, fantasy, and science fiction. Magazines were the most popular media, followed by books. Newspapers were never mentioned.

The next question dealt with topic or subject preferences, however all three groups covered it naturally with the previous question.

Do you think there are a lot of magazines and books on those topics available to students?

Student 2: "There's more things to read in libraries, not the school one."

Student 4: "If you can go to a store that sells books, there's tons."

Student 7: "At book stores you can find a lot of good books and many magazines too. I like to go to the bookstore to get books."

Student 13: "There's a good amount of stuff to read. If you ask the librarian, you can find even more. It's hard to find alone."

Student 14: "My mom finds perfect stuff for me to read."

Students felt that there was ample materials available, however, it was difficult for many students to feel that they could access them easily. They either asked their librarians, teachers, or someone at home to help them. The consensus was that bookstores had the most attractive materials to students.

What is your favorite free time activity?

Student 1: "Hanging out with friends."

Student 2: "Playing with friends."

Student 3: "Reading."

Student 4: "Watching T.V."

Student 5: "Playing sports."

Student 6: "Watching T. V."

Student 7: "Reading."

Student 8: "Watching T.V."

Student 9: "Video games."

Student 10: "Video games."

Student 11: "Horseback riding and playing with my dog."

Student 12: "Watching T.V."

Student 13: "Talking to friends."

Student 14: "Playing with friends."

Student 15: "Playing sports."

Playing with friends and T.V. ranked highest, followed by sports, video games and reading equally. Only one student mentioned a different activity than the others (riding horses).

Did your parents read to you when you were little? Do they still?

Student 3: "Yes, my mom has always read to us at night. We read chapter books together now."

Student 5: "I think my mom read to me a lot. We have a lot of baby books around the house, but not a lot of older kid stuff to read."

Student 9: "My dad used to read to me, but now I read alone."

Student 11: "We don't have time to read together any more."

Student 14: "My mom reads a lot, and she reads to me a lot too. She's a good reader."

The limited evidence here points to the fact that the students who enjoy leisure time reading, had exposure at home. This has been researched a great deal, and these tendencies agree with the idea that good reading begins at home.

If you got a book for your birthday, would you think it was a good gift?

Student 1: "If I liked it, I would think it was a good gift. It would have to be better than a toy."

Student 3: "I get books as gifts from my grandma a lot. She gets good ones, and I like them."

Student 8: "No way."

Student 9: "I like to get new books of *Goosebumps* when they come out."

Student 15: "I'd rather have something else as a gift."

Most students agreed that a book would be an acceptable gift, however most students would prefer something else. Again, the students who enjoyed reading, found a book to be a better gift than a student who did not enjoy reading. This was an obvious conclusion.

Do your parents like to read? Do they think it's important?

Student 1: "My mom reads sometimes. My dad likes the sports section of the newspaper. They probably think it's important though."

Student 6: "My mom thinks reading is good, but she never has time to read. I asked her about it and she said we (the children) kept her too busy to read. She wants me to do good at reading."

Student 12: "My parents think reading is very important. They both like it. They can read big books."

Students perceived their parents as feeling that reading was important, but not many students saw their parents read on a regular basis. This follows the belief that, "Reading is important, but I don't have time to do it." When children hear this message at home, it is carried to school and tends to determine reading attitudes.

When did you learn to read? Who taught you?

Student 2: "I learned in school, I guess."

Student 3: "My grandma taught me."

Student 7: "My mom taught me when I was little."

Student 13: "I think my mom taught me a little, then school did."

Most students reported that their mothers or caregivers taught them, followed by their teachers. One student responded that she learned on her own, and another claimed she learned from "Sesame Street." Very few students could recall the age that they started to read.

In the final section of the focus groups the researcher asked three either/or questions:

Which activity would you choose?

1. *Your teacher asks, "Either you may read or play a computer game."*

Of the fifteen students, eleven (73%) would rather play a computer game.

2. *Your parent asks, "Do you want to read or watch T.V.?"*

Of the fifteen students, twelve (80%) would rather watch T.V.

3. *Your friend asks, "Do you want to read or hang out and talk?"*

Of the fifteen students, ten (67%) would rather hang out and talk.

Data from Suburban Environment School

All fifteen students were in attendance and were relaxed in appearance. There was one question after the introductory paragraph was read: "Are you sure you won't tell our teachers who said bad stuff (Student 10)?"

Do you read in your free time?

Student 3: "No, I don't like to read when I can be doing other things."

Student 5: "I love to read in my free time. My family reads together at night sometimes."

Student 8: "Sometimes I like to read in my free time, but I like other things too."

Student 10: "Reading when you don't have to is dumb. I only read when my teacher makes me."

Student 13: "I like to read, if I like the book a lot."

There was a wide variety of responses from the suburban group. It seemed they were more confident reporting their feelings than the urban group. Student 13's response was interesting in that it was identical to one from the urban group. She only liked to read, if she enjoyed the material.

How often do you read?

Again, the replies varied, however the average time spent reading outside of school was 1.5 hours per day.

Tell me how you feel about free time reading.

Student 1: "I feel good about being able to read, but sometimes I don't like the book. It's not fun then."

Student 7: "I guess it's O.K., but I like to do other things in my free time. We read in school."

Student 11: "Reading opens up a whole new place. I feel good when I am reading."

Feelings varied depending on how comfortable the pupils were with their abilities, as well as with interest in the material available to read during leisure time.

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

Student 2: "I enjoy reading because it helps me to learn things."

Student 6: "Reading is fun when I'm home because no one listens to me. If I make a mistake, it's O.K."

Student 14: "I think reading is O.K. when I get to pick the book."

Most students seemed to enjoy reading, again, when they had the ability to choose the subject. It was clear that this group of suburban students preferred to read at home, rather than in school.

What type of materials do you enjoy reading (e.g. ,books, magazines)?

Student 4: "My favorite stuff to read are magazines."

Student 5: "Yeah, magazines for kids are really fun. The pictures help to get new ideas."

Student 9: "Books are O.K., if they are about good stuff."

Student 11: "Books are great if you want a long, detailed story.
Magazines are good for gossip, like in Sassy."

Student 15: "My parent like me to read the newspaper, but it is boring.
Books are better. The news is depressing."

Magazines were definitely a popular free reading choice, and it was later discovered that the fifth grade teachers at that school maintained a large circulation of magazines in the classrooms. Teacher influence was a motivating factor for this group, more than the urban students. Also, newspapers were mentioned a few times with the suburban group, but the comic sections were the main focus.

What topics do you like reading about?

Student 2: "I like girl-boy books about going out and dating."

Student 3: "Yuck. I hate those."

What do you like?

"I like *Nintendo Magazine*, and sports stuff."

Student 7: "I like sports or animal stories, if I have to read."

Student 12: "I guess that mysteries are good, like those *Goosebumps* books. A lot of kids read those."

Student 13: "Yeah, those (*Goosebumps*) are great stories."

Student 15: "Yeah, I like *Goosebumps* the best too."

Responses to topic selections were predictable. Girls tended to like gossip and movie star magazines, as well as romance, and animal

stories. The boys leaned towards sports, video game magazines, and science fiction or mystery stories. The *Goosebumps* series was very popular among both boys and girls.

Do you think there are a lot of magazines and books on those topics available to students?

Student 1: "Our teachers have a lot of magazines in the classroom, we like those."

Student 4: "There are a lot of books that my friend gets, that the library doesn't have. His mom goes to the bookstore to get them."

Student 5: "Bookstores have a lot, and better books and magazines than we have at school."

Student 10: "There's never good stuff to read in school."

Student 14: "Sometimes my teacher finds a good book to read. It's hard to find them alone, I mean to good ones."

As with the urban group, the students felt that there were ample materials, however locating them was not easy for them. Bookstores, again were the favorable location for obtaining "the good books." Libraries were mentioned, but most students agreed that the school library was not as good as the public library. Adult assistance was looked upon in a helpful light by this group.

What is your favorite free time activity?

Student 1: "Playing sports."

Student 2: "Reading."

Student 3: "Playing video games."

Student 4: "Watching T.V."

Student 5: Reading."

Student 6: "Reading."

Student 7: Watching T.V."

Student 8: "Playing sports."

Student 9: "Talking to friends."

Student 10: "Talking to friends."

Student 11: "Reading."

Student 12: "Watching T.V."

Student 13: "Watching T.V."

Student 14: "Watching T.V."

Student 15: "Talking to friends."

Watching T.V. ranked highest, followed by reading, talking to friends, playing sports and playing video games respectively. Television was the free time activity of choice across the boards in both the urban and suburban environments.

Did your parents read to you when you were little? Do they still?

Student 6: "Both of my parents read to my sister and me. They like to read chapter books that are too hard for us to read alone. I like it when they read to us."

Student 8: "I think my mom read to me when I was little, but not any more."

Student 10: "Maybe she used to, but now I don't listen."

Student 15: "Oh yeah, they read a lot. Sometimes at holiday times we still read together, but my mom works more now, so we don't have much time."

Most students mentioned that they were read to when they were younger, but with the exception of students six and fifteen, parental reading ceased as the student aged.

If you got a book for your birthday, would you think it was a good gift?

Student 2: "Books make good gifts because you can read them over again whenever you want to."

Student 9: "I would like a book as a gift, if I have not read it yet."

Student 13: "I'd rather have something that I could play with."

Student 14: "A video game or a toy would be better than a book, but a book would be better than clothes."

Again, most students felt that a book would be a good gift; however only if it was one they liked. The majority of students would prefer something else as a gift, such as a toy. The fact that a book was a better gift than clothes (student 14) was encouraging though.

Do your parents like to read? Do they think it's important?

Student 3: "My parents don't like to read, but they want me to get better reading grades, so I guess they think it's "sorta" important."

Student 5: "Both of my parents like to read, so yes, they think it's important to know how."

Student 7: "My mom reads the newspaper on Sunday, but that's for the coupons. I suppose that's important."

Student 12: "My dad reads a lot at work. He thinks it is very important to be a good reader. My mom reads a lot of magazines like *Time*, and *People*."

Students' perceptions of their parents reading practices suggest that the better reader's parents read more than the poorer readers parents. More parents were reported to be reading in in suburbs than in the urban settings. As indicated earlier, this has been the target of numerous investigations which have mostly concluded that reading begins in the home.

When did you learn to read? Who taught you?

Student 4: "I learned to read a little before school, but mostly in school. My grandma read to me when I was young."

Student 6: "My mom says I was reading before I went to school. She says I learned quickly. She taught me, I think."

Student 10: "My mom tried to teach me, but I don't like to sit around. I tried to learn at school."

Student 12: "My mom taught me how, and I watched 'Sesame Street'."

Most of the students from the suburban school reported that their mothers were the primary teachers in their learning to read. "Sesame Street" was mentioned here, as well as at the urban school. School or teachers was the second most popular response.

In the final section of the focus groups the researcher asked three either/or questions:

Which activity would you choose?

1. *Your teacher asks, "Either you may read or play a computer game."*

Of the fifteen students, thirteen (87%) would rather play a computer game.

2. *Your parent asks, "Do you want to read or watch T.V.?"*

Of the fifteen students, five (33%) would rather watch T.V.

3. *Your friend asks, "Do you want to read or hang out and talk?"*

Of the fifteen students, ten (67%) would rather hang out and talk.

Data from Rural Environment School

All fifteen members of the focus groups were present. There were no questions after the introductory paragraph was read, and everyone was cooperative.

Do you read in your free time?

Student 3: "If I am home, and there is nothing to do I'll read."

Student 5: "I would rather play video games or watch T.V."

Student 7: "I like to read in my free time, and do other stuff too."

Student 12: "Reading is fun, yes I do it in my free time."

Student 15: "No, I don't like to read. I am too busy."

The rural group generated a wide spectrum of responses, as the other two groups did. Most respondents were reluctant to admit that they read in their free time. If they said they liked to, they would tend to qualify their response with, "...but I also like to ..."

How often do you read?

The average time spent reading for the rural group was .75 hours per day out of school.

Tell me how you fell about free time reading.

Student 1: "I feel good when I have free time to read. I like to read long stories that are really good."

Student 4: "I feel tired when I read in my free time because it is usually at night, before I go to sleep."

Student 6: "I feel happy when I have free time to read, but I'm busy a lot."

Student 9: "I don't read very good, so I feel bad when I read. I don't know a lot of the words."

Student 14: "I think free time reading is good. I would do it (read) more if our teacher gave us time to read in class more."

Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?

Student 2: "I enjoy reading when I have time to concentrate, like when no one is around me."

Student 8: "Reading is dumb. It is boring and you can't play around."

Student 11: "I like to read because it lets you learn new stuff."

Student 13: "Reading is fun when the book is good, otherwise it can be boring."

Interestingly, the word, "boring," was not revealed in the other two groups. It was used several times in the rural group, even when a student was reporting that he enjoyed reading. Nonetheless, most of the students in this group seemed to enjoy reading at some level.

What type of materials do you enjoy reading (e.g. books, magazines)?

Student 3: "I like *Sports Illustrated for Kids*, and other sports magazines."

Student 5: "Yeah, there are some O.K. magazines, like *Nintendo*."

Student 8: "If I have to read, there are some building stuff on your own books that are kinda fun, if the pictures are good."

Student 10: "If baseball cards count, they are fun to read. At least you learn good stuff."

Student 12: Magazines are cool, plus I like *Goosebumps* books, and horse stories too."

All three groups reported that the *Goosebumps* series books were a favorite. Many of the students enjoyed magazines as well. When further questioned about the draw to magazines, the inclusion of pictures and colorful layouts were found to be the lure. Only one student commented on the text, or the fact that there were stories about the pictures. Again, as with the urban group, newspapers were not mentioned.

What topics do you like reading about?

Many of the topics were covered above, however romance, science fiction, humor and animal stories were also mentioned. Comic books were popular among the rural setting boys.

Do you think there are a lot of magazines and books on those topics available to students?

Student 2: "I wish there were more sports magazines for kids. *SI (Sports Illustrated)* is O.K., but there should be more."

Student 4: "I would like to be able to find more of what is out there. If I ask the librarian for a good book on a good subject, she usually finds one that I could not find."

Student 10: "It would be cool to have more sports stories, with funny parts."

Student 15: "There are already too many books. No one could read them all. Look at all the ones in the library."

A recurring theme was that students felt they needed help with book selection in order to find books and magazines they enjoyed. Quite a few students mentioned they wanted more sports materials. Interestingly enough, when the researcher browsed through the school library, there were more than the average amounts of sports related materials.

What is your favorite free time activity?

Student 1: "Reading."

Student 2: "Playing sports."

Student 3: "Playing sports."

Student 4: "Watching T.V."

Student 5: "Playing video games."

Student 6: "Talking to friends."

Student 7: "Bowling."

Student 8: "Building stuff at home."

Student 9: "Watching T.V."

Student 10: "Watching T.V."

Student 11: "Watching T.V."

Student 12: "Reading."

Student 13: "Watching T.V."

Student 14: "Playing sports."

Student 15: "Watching T.V."

Watching T.V. ranked highest, followed by sports, reading then playing video games, bowling, talking to friends, and building equally.

Did your parents read to you when you were little? Do they still?

Student 1: "My mom read to us a lot when we were babies. Once and a while she will still, but not a lot."

Student 4: "I think that my grandma read to me a lot, but she died. My mom does not have time."

Student 9: "I think my mom did read to me when I was a baby. Now I won't sit still long enough to hear her, but she reads to my sister."

Student 12: "My mom read to me then, and she still does. I like it."

Mothers and grandmothers were the readers in all of the responses from the rural group. Fathers and grandfathers were never mentioned. Very few members of this group were still being read to. Most did not seem to want to be read to either.

If you got a book for your birthday, would you think it was a good gift?

Student 6: "I get books for my birthday all of the time. I like it because I add them to my collection."

Student 7: "Yeah, me too. I like to get books with hard covers. They cost more."

Student 11: "I would like a book as a gift, but would rather have something else."

Student 13: "Toys are the best birthday gift. You read a book once and it's over with."

Numerous respondents saw the value of books, and alluded to collecting series books, and other books. Girls were happier with books as gifts. Toys were a more acceptable gift among boys.

When did you learn to read? Who taught you?

Student 3: "I learned to read from my dad and at school. It was hard, but it's O.K. now."

Student 5: "I don't remember. Probably at school."

Student 8: "I learned a couple of words before school, like my name, but I mostly learned at school. My dad can't read, so he didn't teach me."

Student 14: "I think I learned pretty young. I don't remember how."

Dads were mentioned more in this group, than in any other, for both teaching and not being able to teach. School was the most common way of learning, yet many in this group claimed they did not remember when or how they learned.

In the final section of the focus groups the researcher asked three either/or questions:

Which activity would you choose?

1. *Your teacher asks, "Either you may read or play a computer game."*

Of the fifteen students, fourteen (93%) would rather play a computer game.

2. *Your parent asks, "Do you want to read or watch T.V.?"*

Of the fifteen students, thirteen (87%) would rather watch T.V.

3. *Your friend asks, "Do you want to read or hang out and talk?"*

Of the fifteen students, nine (60%) would rather hang out and talk.

Summary

The use of focus groups to collect data from fifth grade students proved to be a useful tool. Students were apparently honest, and willing to share their views, provided their teachers did not know what was individually stated. Most students were fairly articulate about how they felt about leisure time reading and other activities.

Conversations with focus groups of fifth graders revealed that some students of that age group were reading in their leisure time; however most admitted that there were numerous other activities which interested them more than reading did. Television had a strong hold over a number of children. Fifth graders also felt restricted by the availability of appealing reading materials, though many agreed that such media did exist.

The focus groups provided a full spectrum of responses that were useful in answering the following questions:

1. What will fifth grade students from various types of instructional environments say about their interests, attitudes and behaviors regarding leisure time reading?
2. Will any patterns of preferred subjects of literature emerge? If so, what subjects do fifth graders' enjoy reading about?
3. What types of reading materials are fifth grade students most interested in (e.g., books, magazines, manuals)?

Chapter V

Conclusions and Implications

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the attitudes, behaviors and interests of fifth grade students concerning leisure time reading.

Conclusions

From the responses gathered, it was identified that students generally enjoyed leisure time reading if the following three variables were accounted for: (1) they could be in a quiet place; (2) they had material that they liked to read; and (3) they could stop and do something else when they felt like it. The urban population sought places to read that were quiet, and preferred to be secluded when they read. Most of this group was very specific about the places they felt were conducive to reading. The classroom was the last choice for most of them. Suburban children did not want to commit

themselves to reading if they did not like the topic of their book. Rural pupils reported the widest variety of interests other than reading of all three groups. Of course there was evidence of each of these variables throughout all three groups as well.

The average number of hours spent engaged in leisure time reading outside of school revealed that suburban students read the most (1.5 hours per day), followed by rural students (0.75 hours per day), and lastly urban children (0.5 hours a day). Possible explanations for this variance included parental interest in leisure time reading, availability of high interest materials, and the time spent occupied in other activities. There were many reports of time constraints due to parental commitments, homework, and other pre-scheduled activities.

Feelings towards leisure time reading were closely related for all three school environments. Students felt considerably better when they could read alone. There was a high level of anxiety about reading in front of a class. Reading ability seemed to be the largest contributing factor

accounting for this observation. Students who reported a facility to read felt more comfortable doing it than did poorer readers within the same environments. Parental support also was an issue surrounding the feelings of students regarding their leisure time reading practices. Parents who impressed the importance of reading on their children and read themselves produced children with similar attitudes. Children who were consistently read to as young children tended to enjoy reading more as students.

All three sets of focus groups generally agreed that there was a value to reading. Perhaps this was not the true feelings of the students, but the ideas of their educators speaking. An example of this discrepancy was the student who reported that he would not read, yet thought it was important. These values must have been engraved either at home (though this student also reported that his father could not read) or at school. This suggested that impressions made in school must be reinforced at home to become values. The rural group was the only one in which students thought that reading was "boring." The term was never mentioned in other groups.

Leisure time reading material preferences were very similar for all three groups. Magazines were the most popular media, followed by books.

The magazines most mentioned included: *Sassy*, *Young Miss*, *Nintendo*, and *Sports Illustrated for Kids*. Comic books were considered magazines for this purpose, and were only mentioned by the rural students. *Mad* was the specific magazine mentioned from the comic book readers.

There was an overwhelming positive response to the *Goosebumps* series of books. Both males and females expressed their satisfaction for these titles. Other series books mentioned were the *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* books, as well as *The Babysitters Club*. Additional topics of interest were identified by gender. Boys were most interested in sports, science fiction, fantasy, and some animal stories. Girls enjoyed teen romance, realistic fiction, and animal stories. Both genders identified mysteries as a valued choice.

Newspapers were only suggested by suburban students. When questioned about specific sections of the paper, all students mentioned only the comics or sports sections.

When asked where students had access to the paper, most said that their parents subscribed to it.

The majority of students felt there were ample amounts of materials available; however, obtaining them seemed difficult for most students. Many reported they needed help from adults to find the "good books." A surprising number of students claimed that the bookstore was the best place to find a variety of reading materials. Further, it was apparent that most students would read more if given the opportunity to purchase their own materials. Book clubs were mentioned once, but again the selection was not attractive enough for most students. It seemed as though ownership of the selection of materials was very important to a great number of pupils.

The activity most enjoyed by the vast majority of students from all three educational environments was watching television. There is an enormous draw to this solitary practice highly evident in students, as well as in the population as a whole. People just do not make the effort to read as much as they used to. It used to be that reading was a form of entertainment. Now, the television is the story teller

in most peoples' lives. Leisure reading is not as necessary as it was in previous times. It was encouraging to realize that leisure reading was not at the end of the list, though. It ranked second in the suburban group, third in the rural group, but last in the urban population.

The answer to the question, "Did your parents read to you when you were little?" elicited some interesting responses. What emerged was that the children who were read to at home seemed, in most cases, to feel better about, and enjoy, leisure reading more. Mothers and grandmothers were the primary readers, though some fathers were mentioned as well. Only a handful of fifth grade students were still being read to on a regular basis. Lack of time accounted for most of the decline, while lack of interest was a close second. Most students also noted that they thought their parents placed a high value on reading, but were not often observed reading by their children.

Most students agreed that if given a book as a gift, they would appreciate it to some degree, yet would prefer something else. The more confident readers expressed a high

interest in books as gifts, while the middle to low achieving readers stated that they preferred a toy. Girls were more accepting of a book as a present than most boys were.

A great number of respondents mentioned that they learned to read from the children's television show, *Sesame Street*. With the amount of time dedicated to watching T.V., this was not surprising. *Sesame Street* uses a highly repetitive presentation as well as familiar characters to create an environment enjoyable for most children. Other means of learning to read included parental guidance in addition to teacher instruction. The majority of students did not remember when they started to read.

The three final either/or questions asked of the focus groups were designed to rate other activities against reading. Most of the students from all three educational environments reported that they would choose to play a computer game over reading. The majority of the urban and rural groups would rather watch television, while the suburban students documented that they would prefer to read over

watching television. All three groups revealed that they would rather hang out and talk with friends rather than pick up a book to read.

While leisure time reading is occurring among many fifth grade students, a multitude of other activities apparently rivals reading for the attention of most children. Even though there are numerous resources for new materials, the majority of students claim to have difficulty locating them. The good news is that fifth graders know what they enjoy reading about, and they also know what sources they prefer. Magazines for children, on varying topics of interest, were reported to be in the highest demand. Perhaps if educators and parents could direct students to high interest, individualized materials, more students would experience the enjoyment of reading in their free time.

Implications for the Classroom

Educators in today's classrooms are faced with a greater challenge than ever before. Students are not content to read what children have been reading in previous years. They want new material which is reflective of current trends and technology. Teachers must assess the individual tastes and interests of their students, and unearth materials to match pupils' reading preference profiles. Not only must teachers stress the importance of reading for pleasure, they must model this behavior, and constantly share personal reading experiences with students.

Another challenge for teachers is the constant competition with television and the continuing lure of other forms of electronic technology. While advances of this nature can be essential learning tools, they are just that. They will never take the place of reading. Even internet users and video game players need to read. Helping students of all ability levels to find enjoyment in reading needs to be a priority of all educators.

Implications for Further Research

Since attitudes, interests and behaviors pertaining to leisure time reading are usually in place by the fifth grade, further investigation is needed of this subject throughout the younger grades. If students are introduced to high quality, high interest materials from before they are able to read, it should follow that their enjoyment of reading is greater.

There are countless programs designed to increase sight vocabulary and comprehension. Now researchers must develop attitude enhancement strategies for leisure time reading. In order to take on this endeavor, investigations must be extended beyond scores and tables. Students must be involved with research on a primary level. As they are the source of the information, students should have some ownership of the solutions as well.

Most importantly, any research conducted pertaining to leisure time reading should be collected and used to help children enjoy the great literature available to them.

Summary

There are many benefits of knowing how fifth grade students feel about leisure reading, as well as knowing the subjects they are interested in. Educators, librarians and other instructional staff can better recommend materials of value to students. With more interesting materials available, students may enjoy reading more, thereby stimulating further experiences with leisure reading. Parents may make educated selections for their children to read. Authors may know what topics fifth graders enjoy, and write more of those stories. Publishers can make their selections for endorsements easier by knowing what their market likes to read. Finally, students will find that reading about topics that interest them can be a pleasurable experience. They will discover that leisure reading can open new doors and their imaginations will grow.

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Appendix A

The following paragraph opened each focus group so that students were comfortable giving their true responses, without fear of being judged by their teachers or the researcher:

“I am going to ask you some questions about free choice reading (leisure reading). It is very important that you please answer me honestly because I am using this conversation for a graduate college project. I will not use you names in my project, just your ideas about reading. I will also never discuss your answers with your teachers. If they ask, I would only tell them about the ideas we talked about, and not give any names of who said what. I have a tape recorder running so that I may concentrate on what you are saying, rather than taking notes. Please talk one at a time so that I will be able to hear what is recorded.”

Questions for Focus Groups

1. Do you read in your free time?
2. How often do you read?
3. Tell me how you feel about free time reading.
4. Do you enjoy reading? Why or why not?
5. What type of materials do you enjoy reading (e.g. books, magazines)?
6. What topics do you like reading about?
7. Do you think there are a lot of magazines and books on those topics available to students?
8. What is your favorite free time activity?
9. Did your parents read to you when you were little? Do they still?
10. If you got a book for your birthday, would you think it was a good gift?
11. Do your parents like to read? Do they think it's important?
12. When did you learn to read? Who taught you?

In the final section of the focus groups the researcher asks three either/or questions:

Which activity would you choose?

1. Your teacher asks, "Either you may read or play a computer game."
2. Your parent asks, "Do you want to read or watch T.V.?"
3. Your friend asks, "Do you want to read or hang out and talk?"