

The Home Run Book: Can One Positive Reading Experience Create a Reader?

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"When I read Garfield books in first grade, I thought I found something better than TV."

There are numerous controversies in the field of literacy, but there is firm consensus on one point: Reading is good for you. Moreover, there is an emerging consensus that free voluntary reading is especially powerful. Free reading appears to be the source of much of our reading ability, our writing style, much of our vocabulary knowledge, our spelling ability, and our ability to handle complex grammatical constructions (Krashen, 1993; Elley, 1991, 1998).

If reading is so beneficial, how can we motivate children to read? There is evidence that suggests that reading itself is a powerful incentive: Students who participated in sustained silent reading programs report that they do more free reading at the end of the program than they did at the beginning (Pilgreen and Krashen, 1993). Even more important, students who participated in sustained silent reading say they read more than comparison students six years after the SSR program ended (Greaney and Clarke, 1975)! Similarly, McQuillan (1996) found that university students in Spanish for native speakers classes that emphasized interesting and comprehensible literature reported reading more in Spanish than comparisons seven months after the course ended.

These results suggest that a limited number of positive experiences with reading may be enough to create a reader. Jim Trelease (personal communication) has in fact suggested that one very positive experience can create a reader, one "home run" book.¹ The purpose of our study was to test this exciting hypothesis.

Subjects were the entire population of 214 fourth grade students from three elementary schools in the Los Angeles area. In one of the schools, 59% of the students were considered low income (received free or reduced lunch), while at the two others, 17% and 18% were in this category. Forty three (20%) of the students were categorized as limited English proficient, and of these, five were considered beginners in English.

Students were asked only two questions:

1. Do you like to read?
2. Is there one book or experience that interested you in reading?

Results

Nearly all students said they enjoyed reading (216/224, or 96%).² Of these, 118 identified a particular book that first interested them in reading, a remarkable 53% of the sample.

It was clear from students' responses that they understood the second question. While most simply reported the name of a book, some added commentary, such as:

"It was the Box Car Children that started me reading, because it was a good book."

"Captain Underpants! That book turned me on, because it was funny and an adventure."

"The book that got me interested was Clue, because I didn't like to read before."

"I liked to read ever since my first book, Chicka Chicka Boom Boom."

The results for each of the three schools were very similar (table 1). One might expect fewer home run book experiences from the school with the most number of disadvantaged children, because poorer children typically have less access to books, but this was not the case. Interestingly, this school (school 2 in table 1) devotes a large portion of its Title I funds to purchase books, and has the best library of the three schools.

Table 1. Percentage of home run book experiences in three schools

School	n	like to read	report home run book	books per student in library
1	72	68 (94%)	38 (56%)	10
2	90	86 (96%)	46 (53%)	16
3	62	62 (100%)	34 (55%)	13

Limited English proficient students responded similarly to the others: 95% (41) said they liked to read and 56% (24) named a book that first interested them in reading. All but two LEP students answered the questions in English, although children were told they could answer in Spanish or English.

Students mentioned a wide variety of home run books, including Animorphs (8), various "scary books" (16; but 15 of the 16 mentioned a book by R. L. Stine), Marvel Comics (3), Charlotte's Web (2), books by Judy Blume (2), a book from the

Boxcar Children series (2), *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2), books by Beverly Cleary (4) and many, many others. The clear implication of these results is that beginning and reluctant readers should have access to a wide variety of reading materials. The home run experience varies enormously among readers.

Our study confirms Trelease's hypothesis, but some interesting questions remain.

- What motivates potential readers to read a home run book? How do they get interested enough to even try it in the first place?
- Are there also "strike out experiences," negative experiences with reading that discourage free reading?
- Can a home run experience make up for a "strikeout" experience? Can one positive experience be a cure for one or more negative experiences?

Notes

1. The term "home run" book is taken from Fadiman (1947), in reference to his earliest experience in reading, a book entitled *The Overall Boys*. "One's first book, kiss, home run, is always the best." We use the term here not in reference in one's first reading experience, but one's first positive reading experience, the one that sets you on the reading path. We thank Jim Trelease for bringing this book to our attention, as well as for other helpful suggestions.
2. This figure is much higher than those reported previously. Other surveys of reading attitude asked more precise questions, including rating attitudes on a scale and distinguishing different kinds of reading (recreational, informational) and distinguishing reading in different situations (McKenna and Kear, 1990). Our results may appear more positive because a "yes" answer could have reflected even mildly positive feelings about reading, and "reading" might have been interpreted as purely self-selected "free" reading.

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