

Home Run Books and Reading Enjoyment

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Trelease (2001) introduced the concept of a "home run" book, a reading experience that readers claim stimulated their initial interest in reading. The idea of a home run book comes from an observation made by Clifton Fadiman: "One's first book, kiss, home run, is always the best" (Trelease, 2001, p. 136). A large percentage of elementary school children report having had a home run book experience. Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen (2000) reported that 53% of the fourth graders they queried reported a home run experience and Kim and Krashen (2000) reported that 75% of the sixth graders in their sample had had a home run experience.

In this study we examine whether fourth and fifth graders who report having had a home run experience report enjoying reading. In other words, is one positive experience with a book enough to create a lasting reading habit? We also attempted to examine the kinds of books that caused home run experiences: Are early positive reading experiences the result of reading "quality" literature?

Subjects were 266 fourth and fifth grade students. All attended a school in which 74% were considered low income and received free or reduced price lunch. All were native speakers of English or considered fluent in English.

As part of a larger study, students were asked the following question on a written questionnaire, which was administered in class:

1. Was there one book or experience that first interested you in reading?
yes (title of the book or tell about the experience), no
2. Which sentence best describes you?
-I like to read.
-I read only when I have nothing else to do. ("indifferent" in table 2 below)
-I do not like to read.

To determine book quality, the following sources were consulted:

1. A list of the 100 most frequently challenged books (American Library Association; www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/top100bannedbooks.html)
2. Winners of the Newbury, Caldecott and Bluebonnet (Texas) Awards.

Results

In agreement with other studies, most children identified a "home run" book (218/266 = 82%). Table 1 presents the relationship between reading enjoyment and having a home run experience. More of those who report having had a home run experience also report that they enjoy reading (combining "don't enjoy" and "indifferent" categories to allow statistical analysis, chi square = 6.528, df = 1; $p < .001$, $d = .41$). A substantial number of children who reported home run experiences, however, felt indifferent about reading.

Table 1. Reading enjoyment and the home run experience

	Home Run	No Home Run
enjoy reading	126 (58%)	18 (38%)
don't enjoy	8 (4%)	10 (21%)
indifferent	84 (39%)	20 (42%)

These results are consistent with those of Kim (2001), who reported a significant but modest relationship between frequency of reporting "reading for fun" and home run experiences among sixth graders ($d = .30$).

It was difficult to characterize home run books, because, as in other studies, children named a wide variety of home run books. Very few titles were selected by more than a handful of students. The champion home run book was Harry Potter (19), followed by Goosebumps (11), the Three Little Pigs (11), Dr. Seuss (6), Animorphs (5), Scary Stories (5) and Winnie the Pooh (5). None of these books ever won a Newberry, Caldecott or Blue Bonnet award. Three (Harry Potter, Goosebumps, and Scary Stories) were on the list of the 100 most challenged books of 1990-1999.

Conclusions

In agreement with previous studies, a large percentage of children reported that they had had a home run experience. Having a home run experience appears to typically lead to greater reading interest, but it does not guarantee it. It was clearly the case that more of those who had home run experiences became enthusiastic readers. It is

disturbing, however, that so many once-enthusiastic readers became less enthusiastic. This suggests that something happened to dampen enthusiasm for reading after the initial positive experience, what J. Kim has called a "strike-out" experience (Kim, 2001). One hopes these children will have other chances to step up to the plate.

Notes

1. "d" is a measure of the size of the effect. Effects sizes of .2 are considered small, those of .5 are considered moderate.

References

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