

Another Home Run

Jiyoung Kim and Stephen Krashen
California English 6(2), 25. 2000

Jim Trelease (personal communication) has suggested that one very positive experience can create a reader, one "home run" book. 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 tested Trelease's hypothesis in a previous study (Von Sprecken, Kim and Krashen, 1999) in which we found that 53% of the fourth graders we interviewed said that there was indeed one book or experience that interested them in reading. A wide variety of book titles were mentioned.

In this study, we attempt to replicate this result with a different population. Our original sample consisted of three schools. In one, 59% of the students were considered low income (received free or reduced lunch), while at the other two, 17% and 18% were in this category. In this study, we interviewed sixth graders from a high poverty school in the Los Angeles Unified School District: 94% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

Our sample consisted of 103 children, a sample of convenience made available to us by the principal. We have no reason to suspect that these 103 differ in any significant way from the entire sixth grade population of the school ($n = 888$). All 103 were proficient in English, except for four who were categorized as English Language Learners.

We asked the same questions asked in Von Sprecken, Kim and Krashen (1999):

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

In addition, we added the following to question (1): If "yes," why do you like to read? If "no," why do you dislike reading?

Results

A large majority of the students said they liked to read (84% or 87/103). Of the

sixteen who said they did not like to read, nearly all said it was because books were boring, e.g. "I dislike reading because it is boring and because if I keep on reading I will go to sleep." In fact, ten of the subjects used the word "boring" in their responses. Only one subject disliked reading because it was "hard."

Most subjects reported having a home run book experience: 75% (77/103) said that there was one book or experience that interested them in reading. As in Von Sprecken et. al., a wide variety of titles were mentioned, including Don't Look at the Mirror, Kristy's Great Idea, The Giver, Night in the Terror Tower, The Giving Tree, The Plague, The Outsiders, Island of the Blue Dolphin, Looking for Home, Calling All Creeps, Pigs Can Fly, The Diary of Anne Frank, Goosebumps, Matilda, Annie and the Old One and Go Dogs Go.

Discussion

Trelease's hypothesis receives very strong support here - one positive experience can make a difference. This result appears to hold for children from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. This is very good news. Reluctant readers may simply be waiting for their home run book. Our finding that readers mentioned a wide variety of books underscores the importance of providing many different titles in school and classroom libraries and introducing children to a wide range of literature in language arts.

Our finding that 84% of the students like to read is in agreement with Von Sprecken et. al., who reported that 96% of their fourth graders liked to read. Both of these results are contrary to common wisdom: Literacy campaigns feel children must be encouraged and urged to read, and feel that incentives are necessary. Common wisdom also holds that building up skills must precede reading for pleasure; indeed, the major cause of infrequent voluntary reading, it has been suggested, is the inability to decode individual words "automatically" and fluently. But very few of our nonreaders claimed that difficulty in reading was responsible for their lack of interest. From their responses, it appears that they simply didn't have interesting things to read.

Our findings lead to an interesting question: The students at the school we investigated perform quite poorly on standardized tests. In the 1999 SAT9, the sixth grade mean was the 25th percentile for all students, the 30th excluding limited English proficient children. While these scores are better than other schools at their SES level, they are low. If the children are so positive about reading, why should their scores be so low? In our view, they are not reading enough, and they are not

reading enough because they have little access to books. It has been demonstrated that children from low SES backgrounds have very little access to books at home, in the community (public library) and in schools (school and classroom libraries) (for a thorough review of this evidence, see McQuillan, 1998). It is also quite likely that few of these children have a comfortable, quiet place to read, factors also known to influence the amount of reading children do (Krashen, 1993).

These children are willing to read and appear to be enthusiastic about reading. We suggest that they would read more, and hence read better, if more reading material were available to them. The minority who do not like to read are simply waiting for the right pitch to hit their home run. They don't need encouragement, they don't need incentives. They need books.

Fadiman, C. 1947. *Party of One: The Selected Writings of Clifton Fadiman*. Cleveland: The World Publishing Company.

Krashen, S. 1993. *The Power of Reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

McQuillan, J. 1998. *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims and Real Solutions*. Portsmouth: Heinemann Publishing Company.

Von Sprecken, D., Kim, J. and Krashen, S. 2000. The home run book: Can one positive reading experience create a reader? *California School Library Journal* 23 (2): 8-9.