

A STUDY OF THE READING INTERESTS OF HIGH-ABILITY READERS  
IN A NORTH CAROLINA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

by  
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This study describes a questionnaire survey of 21 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students identified as high-ability readers in a central North Carolina school. The survey was conducted to determine the reading interests of high ability readers, their sources for reading materials, and their methods of selection.

The study participants showed tremendous variety in their selection of reading material. They showed interest in books written both above and below their reading level, and in a wide range of genres. Fantasy and science fiction were popular genres for both boys and girls. Girls showed a strong interest in historical fiction. Most of the participants sought their reading material from home, the school library, and from bookstores, rarely using the classroom, the public library, or friends as a source for books. They preferred to select books independently, by browsing or searching on particular topics, rather than by relying on recommendations from parents, teachers, or librarians. Peer recommendations were also frequently used as a method of selection, even though the participants did not see reading as an activity valued by their friends.

Headings:

Children's reading -- Gifted Children

Surveys -- Children's reading

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## **Introduction**

While it is important to encourage a love of reading in reluctant or struggling readers, an effort that has been the focus of a great deal of research over the last several decades, it is equally essential to ensure that avid or accelerated readers continue to enjoy reading and are supplied with appropriate reading material. Indeed children's reading patterns in later life are usually determined by the reading habits they form between fourth and eighth grade (Halsted, 1988). These are crucial years also because many previously avid readers begin to lose interest in reading as a leisure activity as their attention is diverted to other activities such as sports, computers, and fantasy games (Martin, 1984). High ability readers also tend to prefer reading materials of their own choosing and may abandon reading if they grow to resent the types of reading assigned in the classroom (Halsted, 1988). Teachers, media specialists, and children's librarians should be aware of the needs of these students in order to provide them with appealing books that will allow them to continue to enjoy reading and encourage them to reach their full potential.

Because so little research has been done to determine the needs of high ability readers, it is difficult to know exactly what those needs are. How do the reading interests of high ability readers compare to those of other students? Are they satisfied with the books written for their age group, or do they tend to seek out books written for older audiences? How do they select the books they read? These were some of the questions that I hoped to

answer when I began this project, in which I attempted to determine the reading interests of high ability elementary school readers and the influences on their reading choices.

### **Relevant Literature**

Most of the research related to the problem of serving the needs of high ability readers has been focused on the problems of gifted students in general. While I hesitate to use the term "gifted" in my own research, the research in this area has proved useful, since most of it focuses on the gifted student's tendency to develop reading skills early and to have an avid interest in reading. In their literature review on affective connections for gifted readers, Cooter and Alexander (1984) cite Boston's (1978) twelve characteristics of gifted students, including the tendency for these students to learn to read early and "to read a great deal independently" (Cooter and Alexander, p. 98). They also cite Terman and Lima's (1931) early work on children's reading habits, stating that "there is no trait more characteristic of the gifted than the ability and desire to learn to read" (Cooter and Alexander, p. 99). Cooter and Alexander draw from these traits, and from Mathewson's (1976) proposal that a favorable attitude and appropriate motivation are critical to ensure that students read and comprehend at peak efficiency. They assert that it is essential for educators to focus on the needs of gifted students, who often tend to hide their abilities to avoid standing out from their peers. They conclude that teachers must try to appeal to the interests of gifted students in order to encourage a positive attitude towards reading activities and a desire to perform to the best of their abilities.

In an earlier study, Kathleen Stevens (1980) found that interest plays a vital role in the reading comprehension achievement of higher level readers. By determining individual students' interests in particular topics and creating reading comprehension tests consisting of

high and low interest passages, she determined that the performance of higher ability readers was significantly affected by their interest in the passage topics, a phenomenon that did not occur in readers of middle or lower ability. Like Cooter and Alexander, Stevens concludes that, while educators tend to be content with the better-than-average performance of most gifted students, they should focus on helping these student reach their maximum potential by providing them with interesting reading materials.

Other research also suggests that providing high ability readers with materials that interest them is vital in order to encourage and maintain their love of reading. In designing her questionnaire to determine what distinguished gifted students from their classmates in regular classes in terms of reading interests, library use, and early childhood experiences, Susan Swanton (1984) included a question asking students to recommend methods that teachers, parents, and librarians should adopt in order to encourage reading. Gifted students frequently suggested that educators should "supply more books of interest to kids," while students in regular classes suggested assigning reading homework and "showing more what can be learned from reading" (p. 102). Swanton obtained similar results when she asked students why they liked to read. For the students in the gifted classes, freedom and flexibility was the most common response, while students in regular classes more often cited the educational value of reading as the thing they liked best. When she shared her results with a group of gifted students, they confirmed this opinion, advising educators to "go by what kids like to read; don't force or assign a particular book." They said they liked to have a choice of books to complete reading assignments and were resistant to parental selections (p. 102).

Swanton's research suggests that having the independence and freedom to select books of their own is crucial to high ability readers. This corresponds to Gary Bates' findings in his review of research on reading strategies for the gifted (Bates, 1984). Like Cooter and Alexander, Bates looked to the characteristics of gifted learners that had been determined by researchers. He cites the work of Dunn and Price (1980), who concluded that gifted students are self-motivated and prefer to learn independently. Based on this research, Bates evaluated traditional methods of teaching reading in terms of gifted learning styles. He concluded that the traditional directed reading activities often used in classrooms to target word recognition and comprehension skills were ineffective for gifted students and suggested that these methods be revised to include more independence and flexibility.

All of these studies show that high ability readers have special needs of which educators and librarians who work with children should be aware. In my own research, I hope to discover what the reading and selection habits of these students are, in order to understand how adults can encourage their interest in reading. Do high ability students select books based on booktalks or recommendations from teachers or librarians? Or do they resist recommendations, preferring to seek out and discover books on their own, in which case providing displays of a variety of interesting books might be most effective?

While all of the research emphasizes the importance of interest in obtaining the best performance from gifted and high level readers, researchers seem to disagree on the reading interests of this group. From questioning students on their favorite genres and authors, Swanton found that, while mysteries and Judy Blume books were popular with both gifted students and those in regular classes, there were significant differences in the other reading preferences of the two groups (Swanton, 1984). For example, science fiction and fantasy

books were extremely popular with gifted students, but very low on the list of favorites for the other students surveyed. This finding contradicts Hawkins' study of the reading interests of gifted children, in which she concluded that there were no significant differences between the reading preferences of gifted students and other children in their age group (Hawkins, 1983). The difference may be explained by the design of Swanton's research study, which compared the answers of a group of gifted students ranging from third through eighth grade to a group of regular students in sixth grade. Hawkins controlled for the grade-level of the participants in her results, and thus may provide a more accurate comparison between gifted and regular students. Cooter and Alexander (1984), however, in their review of past research on gifted children, found that these students often prefer materials written for older audiences. This could explain Swanton's discovery that gifted students prefer the public library over the school library media center, because the public library would offer them a wider range of materials for different ages.

The question of how the reading interests of high ability readers differ from those of other students in their age group was one of the major issues I intended to address in this project. By asking students how they select reading material, I hoped to find out if they were satisfied with the books selected for their age group in the school media center, or if they preferred to explore books for older readers. Did they perceive books targeted at their age group as too easy, or uninteresting, or did they still enjoy reading them? Do they find most of their reading material at the school library, or do they tend to seek out books from other sources, like the public library, the classroom, or bookstores?



## **Research Methodology**

In order to learn more about the reading interests and reading influences of high ability readers, I designed and administered a written survey to fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students at a school in central North Carolina. Participants were selected on the basis of teacher recommendations. Three students from each of the three fourth, fifth, and sixth grade classes were recommended as high ability readers, and of these I received parental permission to include 21 students in my study. To protect the privacy of the participants, each student was identified on the survey by a randomly assigned number, and asked merely to indicate his or her grade level and gender on the survey itself.

I decided to use a survey methodology because I felt it would be the most efficient way to learn about the reading interests of high ability readers. It enabled me to ask a wide range of questions, often with forced-choice responses, which were fairly easy to code and to analyze. I also chose this method because I wanted to obtain information directly from the students about their reading choices, rather than seeking it from other sources, such as classroom reading logs. And I wanted to select a method that would be less intimidating, offering the participants more anonymity than a formal interview would have allowed. On the whole, the written survey seemed to be the best method for obtaining the kind of information I was seeking.

I chose to study fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students because I wanted to compare the reading levels of the books they listed on the survey to the reading scores assigned to them in the End of Grade tests, which are required for all North Carolina public school students starting at the end of third grade. I also wanted to see how students who excelled

at reading in the classroom performed on standardized tests of reading comprehension. My other reason for selecting this age range was due to Halsted's assertion that children often develop the reading patterns they will maintain into adulthood between fourth and eighth grade (1988). I hoped to determine what these reading patterns were, through survey questions about the participants' favorite genres, topics, and types of reading, as well as about their sources for reading material and their methods of selection.

The survey (Appendix A) consisted of twenty questions. The first section consisted of six open-ended questions, asking students to list specific books, authors, and topics about which they most enjoyed reading. These questions were designed to start the students thinking about their reading preferences, as well as to find out more about their reading interests and the level of books they commonly read. The second section included 10 multiple choice questions asking how frequently participants used various sources (public library, school library, bookstore, etc.) for reading materials. The final section of the survey asked participants to rate their top three favorite genres, types of reading materials, and methods for selecting books. Through the question about methods of selection, I was hoping to learn whether high ability readers prefer to discover books through independent searches, or if they tended to rely on the recommendations of others. If they cited recommendations as a major reason for selecting the books they read, I wanted to see whose judgment they relied on most. From the literature on gifted students, I suspected that the participants would choose to seek out books on their own, and if they did rely on recommendations, that their peers would be more of an influence than their parents, or other adults.

To test the usability of the survey instrument, I conducted a small pilot study with three students outside of the target school: two fifth grade boys and one third grade girl. For the most part, they seemed to have little trouble understanding and completing the questions. On two of the three questions asking participants to rate their top three choices, however, one student only checked one answer, following the pattern set by the middle section of the survey. The other two participants rated their top three choices in all three questions. Although this concerned me a little, I decided to retain the design of these questions, and, in the final study, only one participant checked answers rather than rating them.

I had some hesitation about selecting my participants merely on the basis of teacher recommendations, since many high ability students might be excluded because of teacher bias, or because their classroom and standardized test performance might not be a true reflection of their reading ability. But the alternative approach seemed to involve seeking parental consent to access the test scores of all fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students in order to determine which students could be considered high ability readers, and I thought this might be unappealing to many parents, and discouraging for students who did not qualify. Asking permission to survey students who had already been identified by their teachers as high ability readers also promised a higher return rate on the permission letters, since many parents of students who read above grade level are themselves concerned about finding ways to support their children's reading interests.

I administered the reading surveys on two separate days, surveying 16 students on one occasion, and five more a week later. As I had promised the school board in my project proposal, I talked to each student's teacher ahead of time to find a time that would be least

disruptive for them to leave the classroom. As a result, I ultimately administered the survey to small groups of no more than three students at a time. I chose to give them the survey at school to ensure a higher completion rate, and also so that I could be available to answer any questions they might have. I also wanted to minimize any potential parental influence on the survey, concerned that if I sent the surveys home for the students to complete, their parents might wish to review their child's responses.

In order to increase my understanding of their reading interests, I encouraged the participants to write in any extra information that might help me. Many students did so, sometimes writing in answers that I had not included in the lists of choices, or clarifying their responses with comments. Administering the survey at the school also provided me with information that I might not otherwise have discovered. For example, one student listed as a favorite book the novel she was reading when I came to her classroom. Students also tended to tell me more about their reading interests in the walk to and from the library where I administered the survey. All of this information helped me develop a better understanding of the students and their reading interests. Since I was working with such a small group of students, each survey became a kind of case study of an individual's reading life.

I used a variety of methods to analyze the results of the survey. For each participant, I compiled a list of all their responses and recorded their most recent Lexile score. The Lexile score is determined by a student's performance on the reading comprehension section of the End of Grade test and is designed to indicate the level at which the student should be able to read with at least 75 percent comprehension (Stenner & Burdick, 1997). I planned to compare this score to the Lexile measurement assigned to the books that the participant

listed in the first section of the survey in order to determine whether he or she preferred to read books written above, below, or at his or her reading level.

Along with the summaries of individual results, I also compiled the responses from all participants for each of the survey questions. These included lists of book titles, tallies of responses from the multiple choice questions, and ratings from the questions about favorite genres, types of reading materials, and favorite methods of selecting books. From these compilations, I hoped to see if there were any commonalities in the reading interests, reading sources, and selection methods of the students. After compiling the results for the group as a whole, I also looked at the results by gender, and by grade level, to see if any of the trends could be attributed to a particular age group or gender.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Because I was working with such a small group of students at only one school for this project, it is difficult to generalize my results to draw any overall conclusions about high ability readers. This project is more of a pilot study, which could be expanded to include many more students at a variety of schools. Also, as with any type of social survey, the results of the study are likely to be influenced by my own biases in designing the survey instrument and analyzing the results. As I mentioned before, teacher bias in recommending students may also have influenced the study, by keeping some qualified candidates from participating. Another limitation was my decision to limit my sample size only to students who were considered high ability readers. A survey comparing high ability readers to students who read at or below grade level may have provided a better sense of any characteristics that are unique to this group.

## Results

### Individual Responses

When I compiled the responses for each participant, I found that there was a tremendous amount of variety in the responses, both among the different participants, and in the reading interests of individual students. For example, one fourth grade student listed classics such as A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, The Case of the Baskerville Hounds, and The Three Musketeers as favorite books, yet he listed Dav Pilkey's Captain Underpants as his favorite book by his favorite author. Another fourth grader listed We are Witnesses : Five Diaries of Teens Who Died in the Holocaust as one of the books he would take on a long trip into outer space and described The Exposed (the 27th book in the Animorphs series) as one of the best books he had read this year. The wide range of reading interests held by each student was often astounding. Their choices often varied not only in genre, but in reading level. One sixth grade girl listed Lurlene McDaniel's Till Death do us Part, and Eve Bunting's Jumping the Nail (both novels addressing very serious issues, and written on a young adult reading level) as favorites, along with The Stranger (another book in the Animorphs series, which is written on a fourth grade reading level), and On the Banks of Plum Creek by Laura Ingalls Wilder, a book written at a third grade reading level.

Looking at individual students' responses to the other questions on the survey often revealed interesting results as well. For example, only one participant, a fifth grade girl, said that most of the time she reads because she "has to," rather than because she wants to. She was also one of the few students who listed "Having the book assigned in class" as one

of her top reasons for selecting the books she reads, and the only student who indicated that she "almost never" reads books from the school library. She even annotated her response to the question about the school library with the comment "nothing interesting." She also responded "Almost never" to the questions about her selection of books from the public library (to which she added, "I don't have one"), the classroom, and from her friends. When asked what topics she wished her school library had more books about, she responded, "Guinea pigs, Pokémon, other silly animals, and less Animorphs!" And her suggestion of the best thing that librarians can do to interest kids in reading was "Be kind and patient with them! Having comics wouldn't hurt ether [sic]!"

All of the responses for this participant seem to indicate that she does not enjoy reading recreationally, but does have a few specific interests that she pursues by purchasing materials at book stores, where she said she goes "Most of the time." Her interest in Pokémon, which she also listed as one of the items she would take on a long trip into outer space, is also interesting. Pokémon, which started as a video game for Nintendo, and has since evolved into a type of role playing game with collectible characters, would fit into the category of "fantasy games" that Halsted describes as a distraction that takes the place of reading as a leisure activity for many gifted children as they grow older (1988). Two other responses that are interesting are her description of her parent's view of reading as "Very, very, important," and her response that when she is looking for something to read, she finds things that interest her "Most of the time." Given her other responses, I couldn't help but wonder if she resented her parents' emphasis on reading and perhaps resisted their efforts to encourage her. Her response to the other question, however, was puzzling. Perhaps when she does seek out reading material, she is very focused in her search, only seeking out

specific types of things in places where she knows they can be found. This collection of survey responses intrigued me, as they varied so much from the other surveys; they suggest a student who is quite capable in reading (scoring in the 85th percentile in reading comprehension on the End of Grade tests) but does not seem to view it as a favorite leisure activity.

Another survey profile that I found very interesting was that of a fifth grade boy with a tremendous fondness for the works of Edgar Allan Poe. He listed Poe as his favorite author, The Telltale Heart as one of the books he would take into outer space, and the "new version of the Black Cat" as one of the best books he has read this year. The three topics he most likes to read about are "war, destruction, and death," and he wishes the school library had more books on Poe and "war (all types)". For his favorite genres, he wrote in "Horror" as his number one choice. What interested me the most about this student was that he seemed to be an extremely advanced reader, (tending toward books written at a young adult or adult reading level, and scoring in the 94th percentile on the End of Grade test), and yet he was one of only a few students who described his parent's view of reading as merely "Important" rather than "Very important," or "Very, very important." He also described his friends' view of reading as "Not very important." Most of the time he reads books either from home or from the school library. He only "Sometimes" reads books from bookstores or from friends, "Not very often" from his classroom, and "Almost never" from the public library. His top method of selecting books is "searching for books on a particular subject," and when he is looking for things to read, he finds things that interest him only "Sometimes." Unlike the eclectic and varied tastes of many of the other participants, his reading seems very directed, focused only on a few specific topics, and selected only from



sources that are readily accessible, like the school library and his home. But his survey responses also suggest that he sometimes feels restricted in the choices that are available to him. His response to the question "What is the best thing that librarians can do to interest kids in reading?" was "If they took the YA [Young adult stickers] off of books," and "Suggest books I like more often." This suggests that he resents not being able to pursue his interests freely, because of age restrictions in the circulation of young adult materials in the school library, and because his interests are not often addressed.

## Group Responses

### **Favorite books and authors (questions 1 through 4).**

The following three tables show the combined responses to the first four questions of the survey. They have been separated by gender to show some of the reading differences (and similarities) between girls and boys. The responses to questions 2 and 3 ("My favorite author is" and "My favorite book by this author is" have been combined in the second table.

#### **1. If I had to choose two books to take with me on a long trip into outer space, they would be:**

<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
<u>Andalite Chronicles</u> (K. A. Applegate--Animorphs series) -- <b>2 responses</b>	<u>The Stranger</u> (K.A. Applegate--Animorphs series)
<u>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</u> (J. K. Rowling)-- <b>2 responses</b>	<u>Hork-Bajir Chronicles</u> (K. A. Applegate--Animorphs series)
<u>The Message</u> (K. A. Applegate--Animorphs series)	something from the Animorphs series
<u>Martin the Warrior</u> (Brian Jacques--Redwall series)	<u>Voyage on the Great Titanic</u> (Ellen Emerson White--Dear America series)
<u>Redwall</u> (Brian Jacques--Redwall series)	<u>My Heart is on the Ground</u> (Ann Rinaldi--Dear America series)
<u>Dragon on a Pedestal</u> (Piers Anthony--Xanth series)	something from the Dear America series
<u>Man from Mundania</u> (Piers Anthony--Xanth series)	<u>Please, Please, Please</u> (Rachel Vail--Friendship Ring series)
<u>The Great Brain</u> (John D. Fitzgerald--Great Brain series)	<u>Not that I Care</u> (Rachel Vail--Friendship Ring series)
<u>Swallows and Amazons</u> (Arthur Ransome--Swallows and Amazons series)	<u>Amelia Writes Again</u> (Marissa Moss--Amelia's Notebook series)
a book about space and astronomy	<u>Anne of Green Gables (3 books in one)</u> (L. M. Montgomery--Anne of Green Gables series)
<u>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</u> (Mark Twain)	<u>Alanna: The First Adventure</u> (Tamora Pierce--Song of the Lionness Quartet series)
a long mystery book	a really funny chapter book
<u>Case of the Baskerville Hounds</u> (Arthur Conan Doyle)	Beanie baby books
<u>Crash</u> (Jerry Spinelli)	<u>D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths</u> (Ingri D'Aulaire)
<u>Hatchet</u> (Gary Paulsen)	<u>Godzilla Ate My Homework</u> (Marcia Thornton Jones)
Michael Jordan's biography	<u>Great Expectations</u> (Charles Dickens)
<u>Night Terrors</u> (ed. Lois Duncan)	Pokémon manual
<u>Slam!</u> (Walter Dean Myers)	<u>Till Death Do Us Part</u> (Lurlene McDaniel)
<u>The Hunchback of Notre Dame</u> (Victor Hugo)	
<u>The Telltale Heart</u> (Edgar Allan Poe)	
<u>We are Witnesses: Five Diaries of Teens Who Died in the Holocaust</u> (ed. Jacob Boas)	
<u>White Fang</u> (Jack London)	

**2. My favorite author is:**

**3. My favorite book by this author is:**

**Boys**

K. A. Applegate; All the Animorphs  
 K. A. Applegate; Animorphs  
 Matt Christopher; [The Return of] the Homerun Kid  
 Carl Deuker; Heart of a Champion  
 Frank W. Dixon; Hardy Boys  
 Brian Jacques; Martin the Warrior  
 Jack London; White Fang  
 Dav Pilkey; Captain Underpants  
 Edgar Allan Poe; The Black Cat  
 R. L. Stine; Attack of the Mutant  
 Bill Watterson; Calvin and Hobbes: 10th Anniversary  
 Laura Ingalls Wilder; Little House in the Big Woods

**Girls**

K. A. Applegate; The Message (Animorphs)  
 K. A. Applegate; Animorphs  
 Bruce Coville; Into the Land of the Unicorns  
 Madeleine L'Engle; Wrinkle in Time, Swiftly Tilting Planet, Wind in the Door  
 Rachel Vail; Please, Please, Please  
 Laura Ingalls Wilder; Little House on the Prairie  
 Laura Ingalls Wilder; On the Banks of Plum Creek

**4. Two of the best books I have read *this year* are:**

**Boys**

The Magic Bicycle (William Hill)--**2 responses**  
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (J. K. Rowling)--**2 responses**  
The Phantom Tollbooth (Norman Juster)--**2 responses**  
 Animorphs (K.A. Applegate)  
The Suspicion (K. A. Applegate--Animorphs series)  
The Exposed (K. A. Applegate--Animorphs series)  
Harpy Thyme (Piers Anthony--Xanth series)  
More Adventures of the Great Brain (John D. Fitzgerald--Great Brain series)  
Mossflower (Brian Jacques--Redwall series)  
 a book of space and astronomy  
Catherine Called Birdy (Karen Cushman)  
Crash (Jerry Spinelli)  
Freak the Mighty (Rodman Philbrick)  
 New version of The Black Cat (?)  
Robinson Crusoe (Daniel Defoe)  
Sphere (Michael Crichton)  
The Giver (Lois Lowry)  
The Kidnapping of Suzie Q (Martin Waddell)  
The Three Musketeers (Alexandre Dumas)

**Girls**

The Magic Bicycle (William Hill)  
Voyage on the Great Titanic (Ellen Emerson White--Dear America Series)  
Please, Please, Please (Rachel Vail--Friendship Ring series)  
D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths (Ingrid Aulaire)  
George's Marvelous Medicine (Roald Dahl)  
Godzilla Ate My Homework (Marcia Thornton Jones)  
Journey Across the Oregon Trail (?)  
Julie's Wolf Pack (Jean Craighead George)  
Jumping the Nail (Eve Bunting)  
Many Waters (Madeleine L'Engle)  
My Friend Flicka (Mary O'Hara)  
Princess Nevermore (Dian Curtis Regan)  
Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (Mildred Taylor)  
The Devil's Arithmetic (Jane Yolen)  
The Watson's Go to Birmingham (Christopher Paul Curtis)  
Till Death Do Us Part (Lurlene McDaniel)  
Titanic (?)

The first four questions of the survey, which asked students to list their favorite author, their favorite book by that author, the two best books they had read this year, and two books they would take "on a long trip into outer space," received a tremendous variety of responses. The reading difficulty of the books ranged from Godzilla Ate My Homework (which has a Lexile level of 460, or a second grade reading level) to The Hunchback of Notre Dame (which has a Lexile level of 1340, or a tenth grade reading level). There was a lot of variety in the types of books as well, with several sports fiction titles cited by boys (Crash, Slam! Michael Jordan's biography, and Heart of a Champion), and historical fiction cited by girls (Voyage on the Great Titanic, The Watson's Go to Birmingham, Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry, and My Heart is on the Ground). While this division was not surprising, I did find that a number of boys defied the common assumption that boys do not read books about girls. Among the titles listed by boys were Catherine Called Birdy, Dragon on a Pedestal, The Kidnapping of Suzie Q, and Little House in the Big Woods. One boy even listed Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the Little House books, as his favorite author.

The most common trend in the students' responses to this first set of questions was the widespread popularity of series books. These ranged from older series like the Great Brain, the Little House Books, and Anne of Green Gables, to newer ones like Animorphs, Redwall, the Friendship Ring, and Dear America. Animorphs, a science fiction series by K.A. Applegate, was by far the most popular, with students of both genders and all three grade levels listing particular titles (or even numbers) from the series in the questions about their favorite books, and listing Applegate as their favorite author. Dear America was also fairly popular, although only among girls.

Beyond the popularity of certain series, there was little repetition in the students' listings of individual titles. However, three books that did appear several times were J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, William Hill's The Magic Bicycle, and Norman Juster's The Phantom Tollbooth. I was especially interested to see The Magic Bicycle listed as a favorite title on three of the surveys, since the author, William Hill, visited the school to talk to students at a Young Author's workshop in November, 1998. His appearance probably brought the book to the attention of many of the participants. The other interesting characteristic about these three books is that they are all fantasy novels. The love of fantasy novels, which seemed to be equally popular with both boys and girls, has commonly been described as a characteristic of gifted students (Carter, 1982, Swanton, 1984, Halsted, 1988).

One interesting trend in the responses to the first question ("If I had to choose two books to take with me on a long trip into outer space) was that students often seemed to list titles that might be seen as more "important," or "classic," works of literature, including books like Great Expectations, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, White Fang, and The Telltale Heart. They would often combine these titles with more modern books from series like the Animorphs, the Great Brain, or Dear America. These kinds of responses were intriguing. They indicate the range of reading interests held by the students, who, if forced to choose only two books, would select something light and targeted for children their age, as well as something that is more universally acknowledged.

Another interesting phenomenon I discovered is that frequently the students' responses to the first question mirrored their responses to the question about the two best books they had read this year, suggesting that they were more inclined to remember and list

titles they had read most recently when trying to decide on their favorite books. Their responses to the "favorite book by a favorite author" questions, however, tended to be very different, and sometimes at a much lower reading level than the books listed in the other questions. For example, three students (a sixth grade girl, a fourth grade girl, and a fourth grade boy) who all listed novels written for young adults or adults among their favorite books, described Laura Ingalls Wilder (whose Little House books are generally written at a third or fourth grade reading level) as their favorite author. A fifth grade boy who listed Robinson Crusoe (Lexile 1320, a high school reading level) and Michael Crichton's Sphere as the two best books he had read this year, described [The Return of] the Home Run Kid (a novel for grades 4 through 6) by Matt Christopher, as his favorite book by his favorite author. These types of answers made me wonder if particular authors tended to leave a more lasting impression on children than individual books, so that the question about their favorite author triggered memories of books they had read prior to this year.

## Reading Level

The following graph shows the Lexile levels of the books listed in questions 1 through 4 in comparison to the reading scores attained by the participants.



As the graph above indicates, most of the books listed by the participants in the first four questions of the survey had Lexile levels lower than the Lexile reading scores attained by the students, suggesting that high ability readers prefer to read books that are written at a level at which they have more than 75% proficiency in reading. The graph also reveals, however, the wide range of reading interests of the students, who sometimes enjoy books that challenge their reading ability, as well as books that they can easily comprehend.

It is important for educators to recognize that high ability readers may prefer to read books that are well below their reading level, since to push them away from these books in an effort to challenge them may diminish their interest in reading. As Stevens' (1980) research suggests, interest is vital in order for high ability readers to reach their full potential. This graph shows that interest in a particular book may cause students to

occasionally challenge themselves to read books well above their reading level, even if they often prefer to read books that are well within their comfort zone.

**Favorite topics (questions 5 & 6).**

The following two tables show the combined responses to questions 5 and 6 ("The three topics that I most enjoy reading about" and "I wish that my school library had more books on the following topics"). When a student has listed a specific series or author, I have added a note indicating the genre, i.e. Animorphs (science fiction).

**5. The three topics that I most like to read about are:**

**Boys**

- fantasy--3 responses
- science fiction--3 responses
- mystery--3 responses
- adventure--3 responses
- sports--2 responses
- space and astronomy--2 responses
- action
- adventures at sea
- Animorphs (science fiction)
- Calvin & Hobbes (comics)
- comedy
- comics
- contemporary fiction
- death
- destruction
- drama
- drawing
- fiction
- folk tales
- Goosebumps (horror)
- history
- horror
- war
- wilderness

**Girls**

- historical fiction--6 responses
- science fiction--2 responses
- romance--2 responses
- pokémon (fantasy)--2 responses
- beanie babies
- dance books
- fantasy
- fiction
- guinea pigs and other silly animals
- history
- horror
- imaginary inspiring books
- journal books
- mystery
- mythology
- really funny books
- tragedy



**6. I wish that my school library had more books on the following topics:**

**Boys**

Animorphs (science fiction)--**3 responses**  
 mystery--**2 responses**  
 adventure books--**2 responses**  
 army or military things  
 based on real books  
 biographies  
 comedy  
 Edgar Allan Poe (horror)  
 fantasy  
 Garfield (comics)  
 Goosebumps (horror)  
 humorous contemporary fiction  
 outer space  
 physics books  
 Sherlock Holmes (mystery)  
 sports fiction  
 The Great Brain (humor, historical fiction)  
 war (all types)  
 Xanth (fantasy)

**Girls**

historical fiction--**2 responses**  
 pokémon--**2 responses**  
 beanie babies  
 cats  
 dance (ballet)  
 Dear America books (historical fiction)  
 death  
 fantasy  
 guinea pigs  
 history  
 imaginary creative books like the Magic Bicycle (fantasy)  
 love  
 mystery  
 mythology  
 new books  
 other silly animals  
 science fiction

When asked what topics they most enjoyed reading about, and which types of books they wished their school library had more of, most of the students listed broad categories or genres rather than specific topics of interest. Science fiction was mentioned several (5) times as a favorite topics for both girls and boys. Fantasy (4) and mystery (4) were also named by participants of both sexes, but much more often by boys. Horror and history were mentioned once each by a boy and a girl. One of the most remarkable trends that appeared in these two questions was the popularity of historical fiction among girls. Of the nine girls participating in the study, six of them listed historical fiction in their list of the three topics they most liked to read about. The boys participating in the study showed no interest in historical fiction, with the exception of the Great Brain series by John D. Fitzgerald, a

humorous series set in Utah in the early 1900s. Several boys, however, listed adventure, sports, and astronomy books, topics that were not mentioned by girls. I was intrigued to see that pokémon was only listed by girls as a favorite topic and wondered whether this fantasy role playing game has more of a female following than past games like Magick and Dungeons & Dragons.

### **Friends' and parents' views of reading (questions 7 &8).**

**7. My parents (or guardians) think reading is;**

**8. My friends think reading is:**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Friends</b>
Very, very, important	<b>9 (43%)</b>	
Very important	<b>9 (43%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>
Important	<b>3 (14%)</b>	<b>13 (62%)</b>
Not very important		<b>7 (33%)</b>
Not important at all		

The participants seemed to see a very sharp difference in their parents' and friends' views of the importance of reading. Equal numbers of participants described their parent's view of reading as "Very important" (9 students), or "Very, very important" (9 students). For friends, the opposite was true. Thirteen of the 21 participants described their friends' views of reading as "Important," while seven said their friends found reading "Not very important." Only one participant said that his friends thought reading was "Very important."

All of the participants felt that their parents valued reading, often seeing it as "very, very, important." This suggests that parental influence may play a large role in the development of high reading ability in children. Parents who convey to their children a sense of the importance of reading are probably more likely to engage in and encourage reading activities, and offer their children more opportunities to read.

The friends of the participants, however, seem to have an opposite influence. They do not appear to value reading as highly. While parents may encourage reading, the friends of high ability readers may act as a deterrent, by not sharing the same interest in reading as a valuable or enjoyable activity. Peers who perceive reading to be of little or no importance may even actively discourage others from reading.

### **Satisfaction with available reading materials (question 9).**

**When I'm looking for something to read, I find things that interest me:**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Most of the time	<b>9 (43%)</b>
Often	<b>10 (48%)</b>
Sometimes	<b>2 (9%)</b>
Not very often	
Almost never	

When asked how often they were successful in finding reading material that interested them, most of the participants responded positively. Only two participants indicated that they were only "Sometimes" able to find interesting things to read. Curiously, these were two of the three students who said that their parents think reading is "Important" instead of "Very Important" or "Very, very important." Perhaps the emphasis on reading by the parents of the other students means that they are more likely to encourage their children's reading interests, and ensure that they are provided with opportunities to find interesting reading materials.

### **Sources for reading material (questions 10 -15).**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Home</b>	<b>School library</b>	<b>Bookstore</b>	<b>Public library</b>	<b>Classroom</b>	<b>Friends</b>
Most of the time	<b>9 (43%)</b>	<b>9 (43%)</b>	<b>9 (43%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>		
Often	<b>6 (28%)</b>	<b>6 (28%)</b>	<b>3 (14%)</b>	<b>4 (19%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>
Sometimes	<b>5 (24%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>5 (24%)</b>	<b>10 (47%)</b>	<b>14 (66%)</b>	<b>4 (19%)</b>
Not very often	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>3 (14%)</b>	<b>3 (14%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>4 (19%)</b>	<b>3 (14%)</b>
Almost never	<b>0</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>5 (24%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>12 (57%)</b>

The questions about sources for reading materials yielded interesting results. Bookstores, the school library, and students' homes were all indicated as major sources, with nine students indicating that they used each of these "Most of the time." Often the same participants checked "Most of the time" for all three sources. This suggests that these students read books that are readily accessible to them at home and at school, and also perhaps, have a parent or guardian who regularly takes them to bookstores (perhaps in the absence of a convenient public library, or maybe because the students prefer to read books that they own). The six students who indicated that they used the school library "Sometimes," "Not very often" or "Almost never" also seemed to rely more on bookstores and books from home. Many of these students seemed to have very specific reading interests, such as Xanth novels, Sherlock Holmes mysteries, and young adult or adult novels, which may not be supported by the school library.

On the whole the students seemed to make only occasional use of the public library, contradicting Swanton's (1984) finding that gifted students preferred the public library over the school library. Many of the students in this study did not even seem sure where the public library was. This might be a unique feature of this school. This particular county covers an unusually large area (683 square miles), and the closest public library to the school is 17 miles away, perhaps making it difficult for many students to visit the library on a regular basis.

When describing how often they read books belonging to their friends, twelve students checked "Almost never." Like the question about their friends' views of the importance of reading, this question seems to indicate little interaction with peers about

reading. The participants do not see reading as an activity that is valued by their friends and do not borrow books from them.

### **Desire to read (question 16).**

**Most of the time, I read because:**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
I want to	<b>20 (95%)</b>
I have to	<b>1 (5%)</b>

Only one participant indicated that she reads because she has to, rather than by choice. While this was an encouraging response, it may not be entirely accurate. Some students may have chosen this answer because they felt that it was the "right one" to pick, despite the anonymity of the survey. Still, combined with the responses to the question about how often they are successful in finding interesting things to read, this question suggests that most of the participants enjoy reading as a leisure activity and are generally happy with the resources that are available to them.

### **Favorite genres (question 17).**

**17. My favorite types of books are: (Please read the following choices and rate your top three answers)**

<b>Genre</b>	<b>First (# of responses)</b>	<b>Second (# of responses)</b>	<b>Third (# of responses)</b>
<b>Fantasy</b>	<b>5 (25%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>
<b>Humor</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>
<b>Mystery</b>	<b>3 (15%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>3 (15%)</b>
<b>Science Fiction</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>
<b>Historical Fiction</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	
<b>Other (horror;sports)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>		
<b>Contemporary Fiction</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>
<b>Biography</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>		<b>1 (5%)</b>
<b>Poetry</b>		<b>3 (15%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>
<b>Information Books</b>		<b>1 (5%)</b>	

When the participants were asked to rank their top three favorite genres, fantasy was most commonly rated first. It also received four second-place ratings, (the same

number as the second-place ratings received by Contemporary Fiction), and four third-place ratings (along with Humor and Science Fiction). There was a great deal more variety in the genres rated first by boys, which included fantasy, humor, science fiction, mystery, biography, contemporary fiction, and other (including write-ins for horror and sports). The girls' top choices were evenly distributed between fantasy, mystery, humor, and historical fiction. As was found in the earlier questions about topic interests, none of the boys surveyed indicated an interest in historical fiction.

**17. Girls' Responses**

Genre	First (# of responses)	Second (# of responses)	Third (# of responses)
Historical Fiction	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	
Fantasy	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)
Humor	2 (25%)		2 (25%)
Mystery	2 (25%)		
Contemporary Fiction		2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)
Poetry		2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)
Science Fiction		1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)
Biography			
Information Books			
Other			

**17. Boys' Responses**

Genre	First (# of responses)	Second (# of responses)	Third (# of responses)
Fantasy	3 (25%)	3 (25%)	2 (17%)
Humor	2 (17%)	2 (17%)	2 (17%)
Science Fiction	2 (17%)	1 (8%)	2 (17%)
Other (horror;sports)	2 (17%)		
Mystery	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	3 (25%)
Contemporary Fiction	1 (8%)	2 (17%)	1 (8%)
Biography	1 (8%)		1 (8%)
Poetry		1 (8%)	1 (8%)
Information Books		1 (8%)	
Historical Fiction			

**Top-rated Genres by Grade Level**

<b>Genres</b>	<b>Fourth Grade</b>	<b>Fifth Grade</b>	<b>Sixth Grade</b>
<b>Biography</b>			<b>1 (14%)</b>
<b>Contemporary Fiction</b>		<b>1 (12.5%)</b>	
<b>Fantasy</b>	<b>1 (17%)</b>	<b>3 (37.5%)</b>	<b>1 (14%)</b>
<b>Historical Fiction</b>	<b>1 (17%)</b>		<b>1 (14%)</b>
<b>Humor</b>	<b>2 (33%)</b>	<b>2 (25%)</b>	
<b>Information Books</b>			
<b>Mystery</b>	<b>2 (33%)</b>		<b>1 (14%)</b>
<b>Other</b>		<b>1 (12.5%)</b>	<b>1 (14%)</b>
<b>Poetry</b>		<b>1 (12.5%)</b>	
<b>Science Fiction</b>			<b>2 (30%)</b>

It was difficult to determine if there were any differences in genre preference from fourth grade to sixth grade, because of the small sample size for each grade. Fantasy was heavily selected by students in all three grades, especially fifth, while interest in humor and mystery seemed to decline slightly from fourth to sixth grade. The variety of genres indicated as favorites increased from fourth to sixth grade, although whether this was due to a wider range of interest as the students got older, or simply because they were more familiar with different types of genres is uncertain.

Some of the trends that appeared in this question seemed to contradict the profiles of high ability readers developed in other studies. Hawkins (1983) for example, found that biography was more popular among girls in the upper elementary grades. Yet the only selection of biography as one of their top three favorite genres was by two boys (one in fourth grade, and one in sixth). This may be related to the growing popularity of biographies of sports heroes like Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal.

### Media preferences (question 18).

18. My favorite kinds of things to read are: (Please read the following choices and rate your top three answers):

Media	First (# of responses)	Second (# of responses)	Third (# of responses)
Novels	17 (81%)	1(5%)	1 (5.5%)
Web pages on the Internet	2 (9.5%)	1 (5%)	4 (22%)
Computer games & software	2 (9.5%)	1(5%)	3 (17%)
Magazines		11 (55%)	4 (22%)
Comic books		3 (15%)	3 (17%)
Newspapers		3 (15%)	
Picture books			2 (11%)
Encyclopedias			1 (5.5%)

#### Girls' Responses

Media Type	First (# of responses)	Second (# of responses)	Third (# of responses)
Novels	8 (89%)		
Web pages on the Internet	1 (11%)		2 (29%)
Magazines		6 (75%)	2 (29%)
Comic books		1 (12.5%)	1(14%)
Newspapers		1 (12.5%)	
Computer games & software			1 (14%)
Picture books			1 (14%)
Encyclopedias			

#### Boys' Responses

Media Type	First (# of responses)	Second (# of responses)	Third (# of responses)
Novels	9 (75%)	1 (8%)	1 (9.3%)
Software	2 (17%)	1 (8%)	2 (18%)
Web pages	1 (8%)	1 (8%)	2 (18%)
Magazines		5 (42%)	2 (18%)
Comic books		2 (17%)	2 (18%)
Newspapers		2 (17%)	
Picture books			1 (9.3%)
Encyclopedias			1 (9.3%)



The question about favorite kinds of media for reading yielded fairly predictable results, at least for the top two choices. Novels were the overwhelming favorite, receiving 17 first place ratings. Magazines were the clear second choice, receiving 11 second-place ratings. Both magazines and web pages seemed to be popular third choices, closely followed by comic books and computer games. I was surprised that two students indicated that web pages were their favorite type of reading media, one person rated them second, and four participants rated them third. Computer games and software followed the same pattern, although only three participants gave them a third place ranking. Predictably, the computer game ratings came mostly from boys, with only one girl rating games and software among her top three choices. But the selection of web pages was much more evenly distributed between boys and girls.

#### **Methods of selection (question 19).**

**I usually choose the book I read by: (Please read the following choices and rate your top three answers.):**

<b>Method</b>	<b>First (# of responses)</b>	<b>Second (# of responses)</b>	<b>Third (# of responses)</b>
<b>Looking through bookshelves for books that seem interesting</b>	<b>7 (35%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>3 (16%)</b>
<b>Searching for books on a particular subject</b>	<b>6 (30%)</b>	<b>4 (20%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>
<b>Hearing about the book from a parent</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>
<b>Hearing about the book from a teacher</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>	
<b>Hearing about the book from a friend</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>5 (26%)</b>
<b>Hearing about the book from a librarian</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>1 (6%)</b>
<b>Hearing part of the book read aloud</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>	
<b>Other (Finding it out for myself)</b>	<b>1 (5%)</b>		
<b>Receiving the book as a gift</b>		<b>4 (20%)</b>	<b>3 (16%)</b>
<b>Seeing a movie or TV show based on the book</b>		<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>2 (10%)</b>
<b>Having the book assigned in class</b>		<b>2 (10%)</b>	<b>1 (6%)</b>

When asked to rate how they usually choose the books they read, most students seemed to prefer independent means of finding reading material. Browsing for interesting books was most often chosen as the primary method of selection, followed closely by searching for books on a particular topic. Receiving the book as a gift was also frequently indicated as a second or third choice, tying with topic searching as the major secondary method. Hearing about the book from a friend received the most third place rankings. These answers suggest that high ability readers like to seek books out on their own. In fact, one student wrote in "Finding it out for myself" as the method he preferred for selecting books. The popularity of books received as gifts was a surprise. Students may like to read gift books for a number of reasons, including the book's availability, their fondness for the giver, being able to ask for a specific title, or perhaps because they prefer to read books that they own (which may also be a factor in their frequent use of the bookstore as a reading source). This may be an important thing for adults to realize in their attempts to encourage and support reading, and it requires further study to elucidate.

Another surprise was that "Hearing about the book from a friend" received the largest number of third-place ratings, as well as one first and one second-place. Despite the indication in earlier questions that most of the participants do not borrow books from friends, or see reading as an activity valued by their friends, peer recommendations of books still seem to carry a great deal of weight with these students. This may explain some of the popularity of series like "Animorphs," which have become part of the popular culture for this age group, and may give high ability readers a "common ground" which they can share with peers who may not otherwise value reading.

Recommendations by adults were cited as major selection methods by a few students, with one student each citing librarian recommendations as their first, second, and third choices. Parent recommendations were much more common. Two students relied on their parents as their primary source for information about books, one listed them as a secondary source, and two listed them as a third. Teachers received one first place rating, and two second. On the whole however, the students did not seem to be seeking out recommendations from adults. Knowing this, parents might strive to encourage relatives and friends to give books as gifts to their children, and librarians and teachers to provide frequent opportunities for browsing and topic searches in order to support the reading interests of these students in other ways.

#### **Suggestions for librarians (question 20).**

The final question asked the students what they thought was the "best thing that librarians can do to interest kids in reading." While not every participant answered this question, the ones who did seemed seriously to consider possible methods to encourage reading. Five students suggested using "book talk" techniques: "talk about what the book is about" (2 responses), "tell them about a book they read," "introduce their favorite subject and explain about different books in that subject," and "suggest certain types of genres." Others suggested general reference help: "ask them what subjects they like and point to that subject," "ask kids what they like, then show them good books on that subject." Some students considered methods of matching the collection to student interests: "try to figure out what they like and maybe get things that would interest them a lot so they keep on reading;" and, "Have serveys [sic] like this every year to see what kids like, and put some of [the books] in the library." Some responses were very specific: "if they took the Y[oung]

A[dult] stickers off of books," "having more comics..." and "...have fantasy, trickery, and scary books on one shelf so you don't have to go all over the library searching for them." But other participants seemed to think that giving students freedom and variety was the best way to encourage reading: "have many different kinds of books by lots of different authors," "be kind and patient with them!" and "Allow them ample amounts of time to choose and read a book of their liking." This matched many of the suggestions that Swanton received from gifted students in a similar question on her questionnaire (1984). All of the suggestions show that the participants have carefully considered their own reading tastes, as well as the factors that influence their interest in reading.

### **Conclusions**

The results of the surveys show the tremendous range of reading interests that can exist even in a very small group of high ability readers. While many of them did enjoy books and other materials targeted at their age group, they also tended to explore many other types of books, including novels written for much older audiences, and books which may not be readily accessible to them in their school library. Librarians who work with high ability readers should be aware of this interest and find ways to provide books written at a wide range of reading levels. Teachers and parents should also be aware of the tendency of this group to enjoy books written for younger audiences as well. Pushing them to read only books that challenge their reading ability may diminish their interest in reading. As many of the students suggested, in this survey, and in Swanton's questionnaire of gifted readers (1984), providing flexibility, freedom, and support may be the most important role adults can take in supporting the interests of high ability readers.

While many of the participants seemed to resist recommendations by adults, there was some evidence that adults could still influence their reading interests. The popularity of The Magic Bicycle in many of the surveys suggests that by bringing the author to the school to meet with students, the media specialist and other coordinators of the Young Author's conference exposed many of the participants to a new series of books, and engaged their interests. The finding that participants often chose to read books they had received as a gift also suggests another way that adults can provide reading guidance besides giving recommendations, which may not be as highly valued. Trying to determine the reading interests of students through the use of surveys, interviews, or suggestion boxes may also help adults find materials to meet the students' interests. Many of the books the participants said they wished were available in their school library, were actually on the library shelves. When I mentioned a few of the titles to the media specialist the school, she said she might try to find better ways of displaying these items to bring them to the attention of students who may not know they are there.

### **Areas for Further Research**

One area I wish I could have explored further is the problem of restrictions on students' reading, which may generate resentment and discourage them from reading. These types of restrictions can work in two directions. Like the one participant who complained about the young adult stickers placed on books in the school library, which prevented him from being able to check them out, students may be prevented from pursuing their interests if parents, teachers, or other adults think they are inappropriate for children. But students can also be prevented or discouraged from reading books that adults see as too easy for them. I have often seen this problem in school libraries, when a teacher will tell a student to

find a more challenging book. Preventing high ability students from enjoying materials that may be considerably beneath their reading abilities is almost like punishing them for their talents. This may seriously discourage otherwise avid readers, just as much as restricting their access to books written for older audiences. It would be interesting to explore this topic further, to see how often high ability readers encounter these kinds of restrictions, and what impact it has on their reading interests.

There are also a number of modifications that could be made to my survey design to obtain more information about the characteristics of high ability readers. Looking back on my two questions about the importance of reading to parents and friends, I wish I had included a question about the participants' own view of the importance of reading. This could have shown how high ability readers see themselves in relation to their peers with regard to reading. It would also be useful to compare the responses of high ability readers to those of students who read at or below grade level, to see where any major differences lie.

Another issue that arose from the analysis of the reading survey is the rising interest in Web pages as a reading venue. Since so little of the material available on the Internet is designed for children, it would be interesting to see what types of material children are reading, how they find it, how often they read sources from the Internet, and what their impressions of Internet resources are. Determining whether they prefer to search for sources by browsing (as they seemed to when searching for books) or by keyword searching would be intriguing as well.

One potentially fascinating area of research is the high level of interest in fantasy and science fiction among high-ability readers. This observation has been made by many of

the researchers who study the reading interests of gifted children (Carter, 1982, Swanton, 1984, Halsted, 1988). It would be interesting to conduct interviews with high ability readers to find out why they tend to pursue these types of reading experiences. Do they appreciate the “escapist” quality of these novels or their ability to inspire their own imaginations? Are there particular types of fantasy that they enjoy more? For example, several of the science fiction/fantasy titles listed in the first section of the survey (The Magic Bicycle, Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone, and A Wrinkle in Time) feature young protagonists who have trouble fitting in with the rest of their peers. Is identifying with these characters one of the features of fantasy and science fiction that appeals to high ability readers? A study to determine why these genres have such widespread appeal for high ability readers would be intriguing, as would be a study of the popularity of historical fiction for girls.

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## Appendix A

**20 Questions About Reading**

I am in the \_\_\_\_\_ grade: *(Please circle one)*

Fourth              Fifth              Sixth

I am a: *(Please circle one)*

Boy                  Girl

1. If I had to choose two books to take with me on a long trip into outer space, they would be:

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2. My favorite author is \_\_\_\_\_.

3. My favorite book by this author is \_\_\_\_\_.

4. Two of the best books I have read *this year* are:

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5. The three topics that I most like to read about are:

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6. I wish that my school library had more books on the following topics:

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7. My parents (or guardians) think reading is: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Very, very important
- Very important
- Important
- Not very important
- Not important at all

8. My friends think reading is: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Very, very important
- Very important
- Important
- Not very important
- Not important at all

9. When I'm looking for something to read, I find things that interest me: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

10. I read books from the public library: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

11. I read books from my school library: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

12. I read books from home: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

13. I read books from my classroom: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

14. I read books from a bookstore: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

15. I read books belonging to my friends: *(Please check only one box.)*

- Most of the time
- Often
- Sometimes
- Not very often
- Almost never

16. Most of the time, I read because: *(Please check only one box.)*

- I have to
- I want to

**For the following questions, you will be asked to rate your top 3 answers. Please read through all of the choices and pick the three that best apply to you. Then put a 1 in the box next to your favorite answer, a 2 in the box next to your second favorite, and a 3 in the box next to your third favorite. Leave all of the other boxes blank.**

17. My favorite types of books are: *(Please read the following choices and rate your top three answers. Place a 1 in the box next to your favorite type of book. Place a 2 in the box next to your 2nd favorite. And place a 3 in the box next to your third favorite. Leave the other boxes blank.)*

- Biography (books about the lives of real people)
- Contemporary Fiction (made-up stories about made-up people in the present)
- Fantasy (books about magic, or imaginary places and creatures)
- Historical Fiction (made-up stories about made-up people in the past)
- Humor (funny books)
- Mystery (scary books or detective stories)
- Information books (books that provide facts or information about a particular topic)
- Poetry
- Science Fiction (made-up stories about the future)

18. My favorite kinds of things to read are: *(Please read the following choices and rate your top three answers. Place a 1 in the box next to your favorite kind of reading material. Place a 2 in the box next to your 2nd favorite. And place a 3 in the box next to your third favorite. Leave the other boxes blank.)*

Computer games and software

Comic books

Encyclopedias

Magazines

Newspapers

Novels

Picture books

Web pages on the Internet

19. I usually choose the books I read by: *(Please read the following choices and rate your top three answers. Place a 1 in the box next to the method you most often you to choose books. Place a 2 in the box next to your 2nd favorite. And place a 3 in the box next to your third favorite. Leave the other boxes blank.)*

Having the book assigned in class

Hearing about the book from a friend

Hearing about the book from a librarian

Hearing about the book from a parent

Hearing about the book from a teacher

Hearing part of the book read aloud

Looking through bookshelves for books that seem interesting

Receiving the book as a gift

Searching for books on a particular subject

Seeing a movie or TV show based on the book

20. What is the best thing that librarians can do to interest kids in reading?

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## **Appendix B**



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

AT

CHAPEL HILL

School of Information and Library Science
Phone# (919) 962-8366
Fax# (919) 962-8071
Graduate Student Research Project
200 Barnes St. Apt. C-18
Carrboro, NC 27510
March 6, 1999

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB# 3360, 100 Manning Hall
Chapel Hill, N.C. 27599-3360

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I am a graduate student in the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill. For my Master's paper, I am conducting a research project to learn more about the reading interests of children who are identified as advanced readers. From this study, I hope to suggest ways that the school and local libraries can best serve the needs of these children. Your child has been recommended by his or her classroom teacher as an exceptional reader. I am writing to request permission for your child to participate in the study.

The study will involve a written survey asking your child to answer 20 questions about his or her favorite types of reading, and how he or she chooses books to read. The survey should take no more than 20 minutes for your child to complete. On this survey, your child will be identified by number only. His or her name will not appear anywhere on the survey or in the final results of the project. After the survey has been completed, I may need to conduct a short (no longer than ten minute), tape-recorded interview with your child to seek further clarification of his or her answers. Only I will listen to the tapes, and they will be erased at the conclusion of the study. In addition, I will need to look at the school's records to obtain your child's reading scores on the End-of-Grade test. I am interested in seeing how children who excel at reading in the classroom perform on standardized reading tests.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If at any time in the course of the study, your child no longer wishes to participate, he or she is free to withdraw. I have enclosed a letter explaining this project in very general terms for your child to read and sign. At the conclusion of the project, a summary of group results will be made available to all interested parents and teachers. I will also be happy to discuss the overall results with you personally. If you have any questions or would like any further information, please contact me at 919-969-7207 or by email at willa@ils.unc.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Brian Sturm, at 962-7622 (email: sturm@ils.unc.edu). Please complete the bottom portion of this letter and return it, and your child's signed letter, to me in the envelope provided. Retain the other copies for your records. Thank you in advance for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Ashley W. Larsen

Please indicate whether or not you agree to have your child participate in this project by checking a statement below, signing your name, and returning this portion in the envelope provided.

I grant permission for my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in the reading study. (SIGN BOTH COPIES AND KEEP ONE FOR YOUR FILE)

I do NOT grant permission for my child, \_\_\_\_\_, to participate in the reading study. (SIGN ONLY ONE COPY AND RETURN BOTH THE SIGNED AND UNSIGNED COPIES.)

Parent or Guardian Signature

Date

THIS STUDY HAS BEEN REVIEWED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA ACADEMIC AFFAIRS INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD. You may contact the Academic Affairs Institutional Review Board if you have questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research subject (contact David A. Eckerman, Chair, CB# 4100, 201 Bynum Hall, UNC-CH, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-4100, 919) 962-7761, or email: aa-irb@unc.edu).



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

AT

CHAPEL HILL

School of Information and Library Science  
Phone# (919) 962-8366  
Fax# (919) 962-8071  
Graduate Student Research Project

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hi  
CB# 3360, 100 Manning Hall  
Chapel Hill, N.C. 27599-3360

200 Barnes St., Apt. C-18  
Carrboro, NC 27510  
March 6, 1999

Dear ,

You have been chosen by your classroom teacher to participate in a study about reading. If you decide that you would like to take part in the study, you will be asked to fill out a survey of questions about the kinds of things you like to read and how you choose them. I hope that your answers will help me suggest ways that your teachers and librarians can help others your age find books that interest them. After you have filled out the survey, I may need to meet with you briefly to learn more about the answers you gave. If at any point during the survey or the interview, you decide that you no longer want to participate, you are free to stop.

Talk to your parents about this project to decide whether or not you would like to participate. If you would like to take part in the study, please check the "Yes" statement below. If you do not want to participate, check "No." Then sign your name on the line at the bottom. After you have signed the form, please give it to your parents so that they can mail it back to me with their permission form. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Ashley Larsen

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\_\_\_\_\_ Yes, I would like to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_ No, I do not want to participate in the study

Please sign your name here:

\_\_\_\_\_