Assessing Reading Interests and Preferences of Primary School Students in Cambodia

This report summarizes findings from a 2011 research study into Room to Read’s Book Publishing and School Libraries programs in Cambodia. The study found that books in the school library collections, including many titles published by Room to Read, were engaging and of high quality. The study also found that opportunities exist to diversify the books Room to Read publishes and adds to its library collections. Specifically, Room to Read can publish more beginning reader and non-fiction books. The study recommended integration of assessment of children’s interests and preferences into the design of Room to Read programs.

Background

The School Libraries and Book Publishing programs work together to build a child’s love and habit of reading. Since 2000, the School Libraries program has created over 13,000 libraries dedicated to giving children the space to practice reading. The Book Publishing program produces high-quality, local-language children’s books to populate those libraries. To date, the program has published 707 titles in 24 languages.

Room to Read continually seeks to improve the appeal and quality of the books it publishes and adds to library collections. In 2011, Room to Read commissioned a research study to (1) determine children’s interests and preferences in books, and (2) develop a range of tools for assessing those interests and preferences.

Methodology

In December 2011, the researchers visited four schools in Siem Reap district in Cambodia. They conducted individual and group surveys, assessments and interviews across 700 primary grade students and 20 school personnel. They also analyzed book checkout records, observed library and classroom usage and conducted a text analysis of a sample of books. The wide range of tools used allowed researchers to triangulate results and present a broad menu of options from which Room to Read can later choose to adapt.

Features in Books Preferred by Children

Children prefer large fonts, engaging illustrations, and culturally relevant characters, experiences and settings, as shown in this book published by Room to Read. Source: Flower and a Piece of Wood (2011), written by Nguon Sakal and illustrated by Seng Visal.
Key findings

CHILDREN’S INTERESTS AND PREFERENCES

Children preferred fiction. Three times as many children preferred a hypothetical fiction title to a hypothetical non-fiction title. School library collections reflected this preference, with fiction comprising 87 percent of books.

Children preferred books with engaging physical features and illustrations. Consistent with existing research, the primary reason children preferred a book was the presence of attractive physical features, such as font, letter size or the number of words or pages. The second most common reason to prefer a book was the presence of illustrations. Reflecting this preference, school library collections consisted almost entirely of picture books—books which pair a narrative story with pictures. Ninety percent of books in the collection had a color illustration on every page.

Children preferred books which their teachers and librarians read aloud previously. Among second grade students, almost half stated that his or her favorite book was the same book that a teacher or librarian read aloud the same or previous day.

Children preferred humor and mystery to scary stories. Children expressed a strong preference for the humor and mystery genres over scary or horror books, and a slight preference for humor over mystery.

SCHOOL LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

School library collections were of high quality and were engaging to primary school readers. Books in the collection were attractive, relevant and culturally appropriate in content and language. Ranked on a scale of one (less engaging to children) to five (highly engaging to children), the books in the collection averaged 3.6.

School library collections were fairly challenging for primary grade readers. Only about half of grade two children were able to read a title that the library had categorized as appropriate for their reading level. Of the 76 books analyzed for text complexity, 43 percent of books in the collection were at a reading level for grade seven or higher.

CONSISTENCY OF FINDINGS

Children’s interests and preferences were consistent with existing international research. The bulk of this research, however, has been based in developed countries.

Children’s interests and preferences were consistent across rural and urban schools. The only significant difference was in rural students’ preference for easier reading material, possibly reflecting the difference in reading level measured between the two groups.

Recommendations

Room to Read should source and develop more books for beginning readers. The Book Publishing program has already identified books for beginning readers as a priority and is currently issuing country-specific guidelines on writing for them.

Room to Read should explore sourcing, developing and increasing interest in non-fiction books. Though children overwhelmingly prefer fiction, the researchers observed that non-fiction texts are crucial to prepare children for future success in school and the workplace. Reading aloud to children may be used to develop children’s interests in non-fiction books.

Room to Read should integrate assessment of children’s reading preferences into program design. Integrating assessment into program design can guide manuscript development and selection of books for library collections. Additionally, assessment can encourage students to reflect on their own interests in reading. Room to Read is already taking steps to build internal capacity to adapt and use the methodology described in this study for other program countries.

Conclusion

The study confirmed the high quality of Room to Read’s published books. It suggested expanding the collection to include more non-fiction and books targeted at beginning readers. The study also recommended integrating assessment of children’s reading preferences into program design.

This research brief is adapted from “Reading Interests of Elementary-Aged Students in Cambodia” (2012). Dr. James Hoffman (University of Texas at Austin) and Drs. Misty Sailors, Wayne E. Wright, and Dennis Davis (University of Texas at San Antonio) were the lead researchers on this study. Sovicheth Boun from University of Texas at San Antonio and Molly Wiebe from University of Texas at Austin made significant contributions to the study. The research team would also like to acknowledge their Cambodia field research assistants, Phem Madona, Chhay Vanndy, Thai Seangmean and Peou Sopheak. Sara Kim provided graphic design assistance. For more information, please contact Theresa Chen at theresa.chen@roomtoread.org.