



THE CHILDREN AND BOOKS

An Exploratory Approach to Children's Reading Experience in Chile

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I. INTRODUCTION.

Reading facilitates language's learning process and knowledge. Likewise, it contributes to increase vocabulary, encourages abstract and creative reasoning, promotes imagination, allows critical reasoning development and fosters the ability to express ideas. That is why nowadays reading represents a fundamental skill in the human being development.

Despite all the benefits of reading, Chilean population presents low indicators on this activity. About 45% of people older than 18 years old declare not to read at all. Likewise, the main reason not to read for those that either never read or almost never read is lack of interest (47.3%)¹.

Considering this scenario, during the last years, encouraging reading among population, especially at an early age, has been an issue concerning both public and private sector, which have been implementing different initiatives to generate reading habits among the youngest people. At the same time, children's literature has experienced a major thrust, signal that publishing companies have received, and in order to accomplish this, they have committed themselves to implement interesting and creative offers. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to ask how much we know about children as readers.

That is why *La Fuente* Foundation and its Studies and Assessment Area have directed the investigation "*The Children and Books: An Exploratory Approach to Children's Reading Experience*", which main goal is to know how male and female children are related to books and reading.

In order to accomplish this goal, a survey was conducted. The universe of this survey was 453 children between 7 and 10 years old, beneficiaries of the reading promotion program *Creating Tomorrow's Readers*^{®2}, implemented by *La Fuente* Foundation. This study intended to collect the perception that children have about their own reading interests and habits and their own preferences when choosing a book.

Although, the results of this survey allow us to picture how children from reading promotion intervention programs are interacting with books and reading, the major value of the present investigation are the new questions opened, which need to be studied in future researches, hopefully on a national level.

¹ *La Fuente* Foundation / Adimark-GFK: "Chile and Books: reading indicator and books acquisition", 2006.

² The main goal of *Creating Tomorrow's Readers*[®] program is to promote the pleasure of reading among primary students coming from schools located in low income zones –either urban or rural areas from Chile. The program intends to implement or improve school/mobile libraries; monitors attend every week to educational establishments, in order to perform reading promotion activities and a number of training sessions for teachers and school/mobile libraries workers. The program is made to last two years; during this period continuance of the project is strengthened once *La Fuente* Foundation has finished its intervention.

Another fundamental characteristic of the program is that the bibliographic material given is mostly recreational. Because of that, the reading material acquisition considers no more than two copies of each book, in order to cover a greater variety of topics instead more copies. It means that *La Fuente* Foundation rather than providing additional reading material aims to achieve an approach to recreational reading and to a personal research according to the subject of interest.

II. PRESENTATION.

2.1. Objectives

As it was mentioned above, and because of the lack of a major work with empiric data about children as readers, the current investigation intends to be an exploratory approach to the relation between children, books and reading. In order to accomplish this task the following objectives have been set:

General Objectives

- To explore the way in which children beneficiaries of reading promotion programs interact with books and reading.

Specific Objectives

- Test the reading interest between children beneficiaries of reading promotion programs.
- Investigate reading habits among children related to reading promotion programs.
- Know reading preferences among children assisted by reading promotion projects.
- Investigate the efficiency of reading process performed by children related to reading promotion programs.

III. METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

Type of study

This study is framed within a quantitative paradigm, because it aims to represent a bigger and varied spectrum of cases in respect to results obtained from the different variables considered.

On the other hand, it is important to mention that the main objective of this investigation is of an exploratory sort. Thus, it tries to make acquainted with the investigation problem in order to deduce from the information collected aspects requiring a detailed analysis in further explorations.

Analysis Unit

The unit of analysis of this study is boys and girls from second to fourth year of primary school (children between 7 and 10 years old) being benefited from the reading promotion program Creating Tomorrow's Readers®. Those grades have been chosen because the program is mainly focused on the first cycle of primary education (the first four years of primary school). Within the program, children visit the library on a scheduled basis, and children are lent books home weekly. Reading animation activities are carried out once a week. Training for teachers is also worked out.

Sample Design

The following aspects have been settled as criteria to design and establish the size of the sample:

First, children from second to fourth grade participating on the six projects of reading promotion performances by *La Fuente* Foundation were included. Second, for every project the sample has

been proportionally defined according to the universe. Third, the statistical confidence level used is 95% with an error rate of 4%.

The sample used was randomly stratified by proportional affiliation. In this kind of sample, the distribution of number of cases is done proportionally to the relative weight of the stratum among the group, so strata with more population will have a bigger sample and vice versa.

Once defined the number of samples for each stratum, it was developed a simple random selection of cases where the survey was applied.

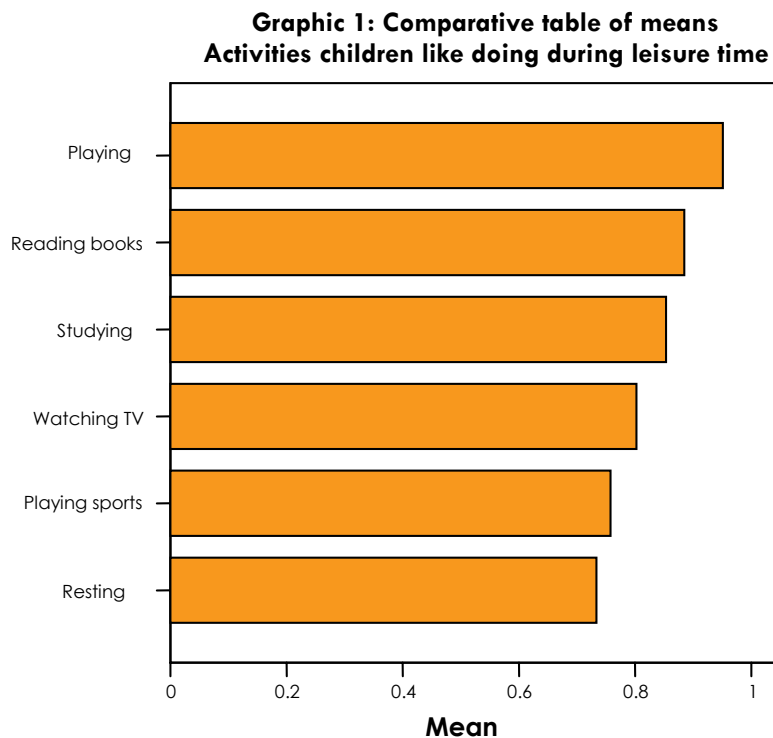
IV. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS.

The followings are the main results of the survey applied to children being beneficiaries from reading promotion programs implemented by *La Fuente* Foundation.

4.1. Reading Interest.

The first aspect of this investigation is the level of children's **reading interest**. The survey asked children –as an introduction- to indicate whether they like or not doing certain activities over their leisure time. The activities were: watching TV, resting, playing, studying, playing sports and reading books.

Considering 0 means “do not like” and 1 “do like”, the analysis of means obtained for each activity shows that **playing (0.95)**, **reading books (0.88)** and **studying (0.85)** are the activities preferred by children, as graphic 1 indicates:

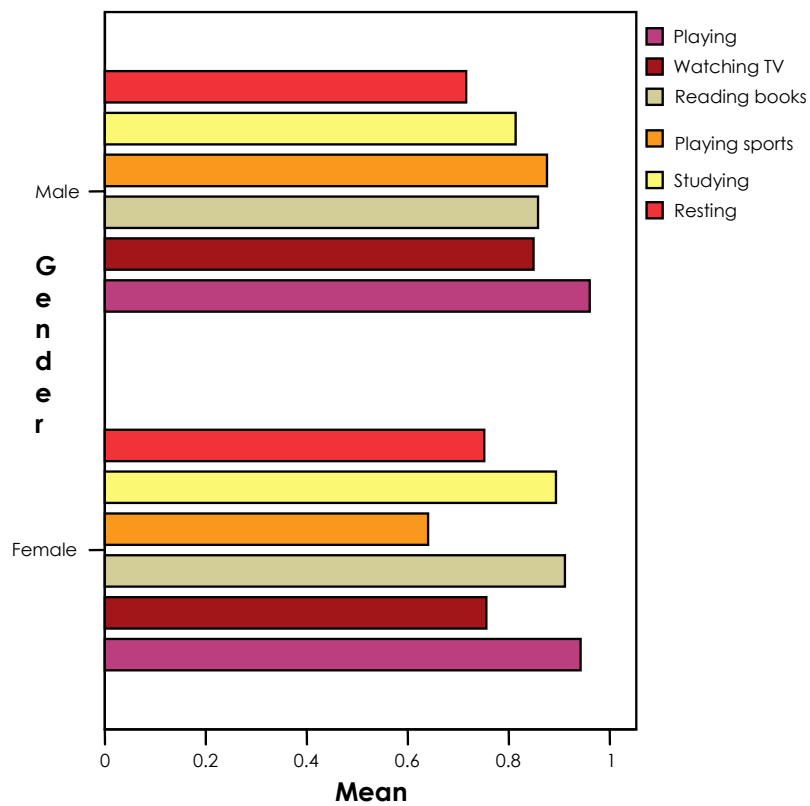


When considering gender variable, it is possible to observe that both male and female believes playing is the activity they like the most during free time, with a mean of 0.96 and 0.94 respectively.

However, other activities present some significant differences of preference (likes) according to the gender. During spare time, boys like playing sports (0.88) and equally watching TV and reading books (0.85). But girls like the most reading books (0.91) and studying (0.89).

According to the activities children like the less, boys indicate resting (0.71) and girls playing sports (0.64).

Graphic 2: Comparative table of means
Activities children like doing during leisure time according to gender

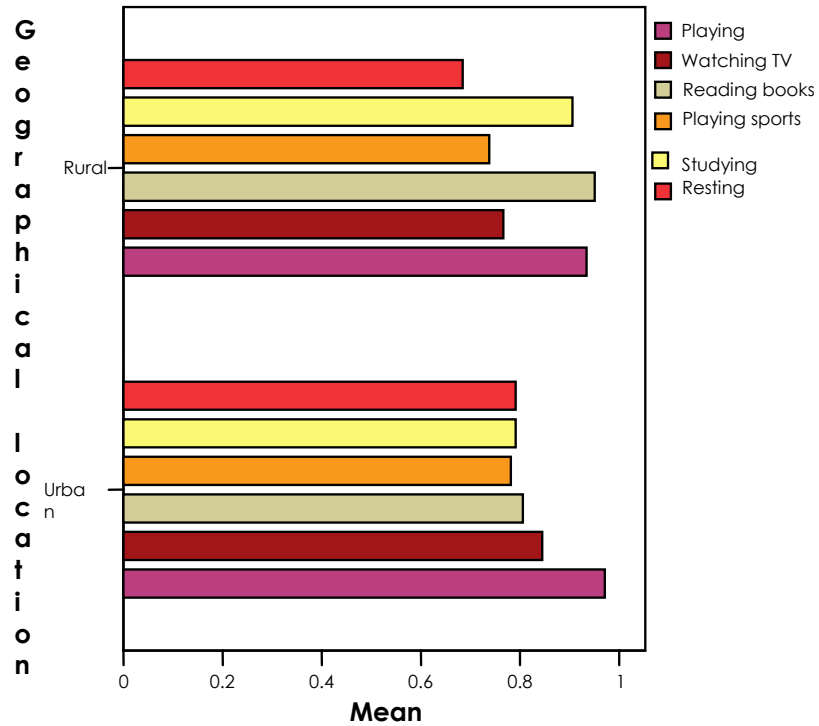


Furthermore, when analyzing data using urban/rural area variable according to children's school location (and also it is the residence area), it is important to underline the significant differences observed.

Activities that children living in urban zones prefer to perform during leisure time are: first, playing (0.97), second, watching TV (0.85) and third, reading books (0.80). But children from rural areas prefer reading books (0.95.), playing (0.93) and studying (0.91).

With respect to the activity they like performing the less, either urban or rural areas children, agree on resting (with a mean of 0.68 and 0.77, respectively). It is also important to point out that the pleasure of watching TV among rural area children is markedly lower (0.77) than among children from urban zones (0.85).

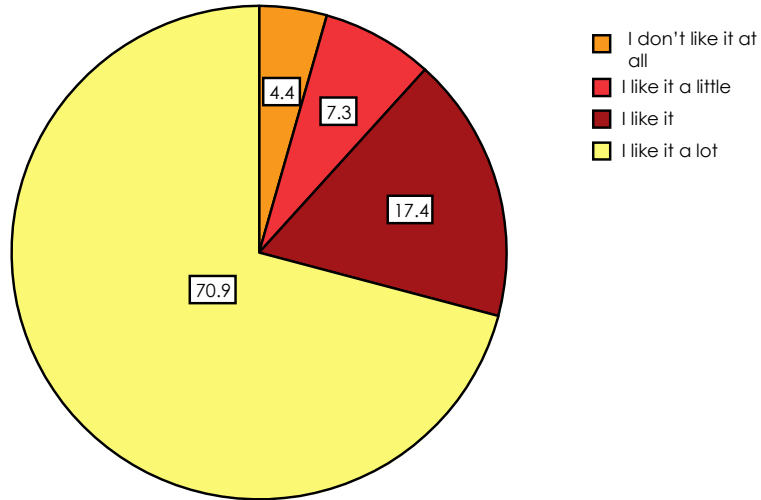
**Graphic 3: Comparative table of means
Activities children like doing during leisure time according to urban/rural area**



In order to focus the analysis on the reading books activity, the survey includes a multiple choice question where children should mark whether they like reading or not. The choices considered are four: "I don't like it at all", "I like it a little", "I like it" and "I like it a lot"

In general terms, data obtained indicates that 88.3% of children either like reading or like it a lot and only the 4.4% of them declare do not like reading at all.

**Graphic 4:
Reading Books...**



Again, if the variable of gender is introduced we can see some differences. As it can be observed in table 1, the percentage of female children that like reading or like it a lot is near to 90%, but percentage decrease to 86.4% among male children.

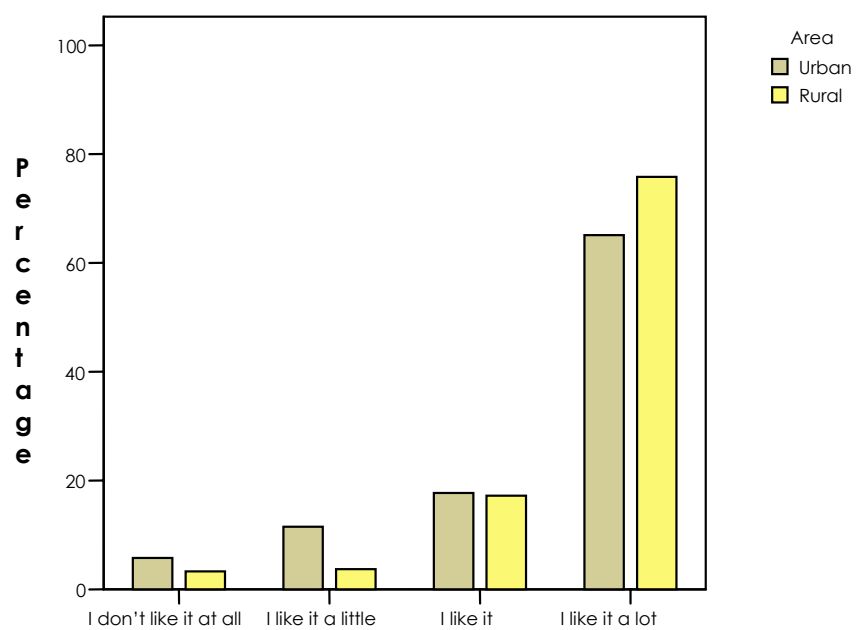
Table 1: Pleasure for reading according to gender

| % | Reading books... | | | |
|--------------|------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|
| | I don't like it at all | I don't like it | I like it | I like it a lot |
| Girls | 2.7 | 7.1 | 15.1 | 75.1 |
| Boys | 6.1 | 7.5 | 19.7 | 66.7 |

Despite the differences observed according to gender -in general terms-, reading is an activity that both girls and boys enjoy quite a lot. As if we observe the graphic above only 4.4% of the students indicate do not like reading at all.

It can also be seen some important variations in percentage terms when analyzing results according to the location area (urban/rural) of schools. The 93% of girls and boys in rural areas has high percentages concerning reading pleasure ("I like it", "I like it a lot"), number that decrease around 11 points in percentage terms among students from urban areas (82.8 %).

Graphic 5: Reading pleasure according to urban/rural area



4.2. Reading habits.

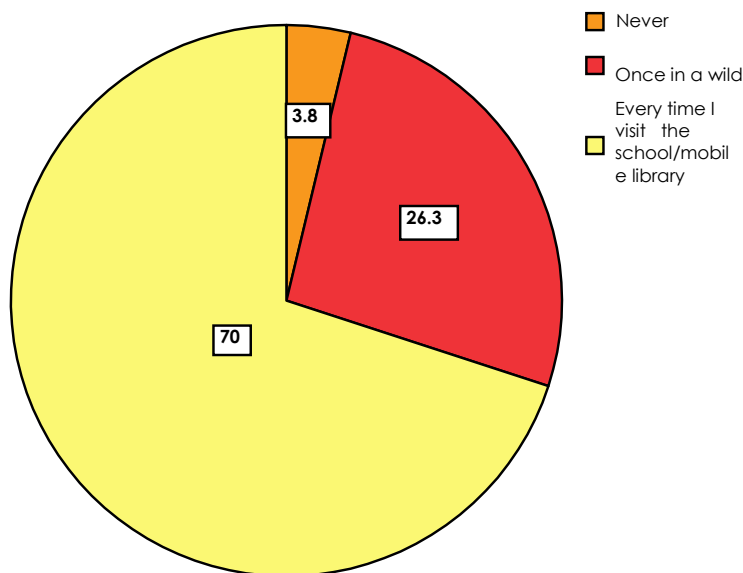
With respect to reading habits the investigation was mainly trying to measure the reading frequency and the space-time where it is taken place.

Reading frequency

Before starting with the analysis of reading frequency data, it is important to remember that this investigation is within the reality of children of first cycle of primary education, being part of a reading promotion program focused on weekly visits to the school library or mobile library with activities of reading animation and voluntary library loans.

According to that, when observing the following graphic it is possible to appreciate that 70% of children declare that they borrow books voluntarily, either from the library whenever they visit it, or from the mobile library whenever it comes to the school.

Graphic 6:
I borrow books to the school/mobile library...



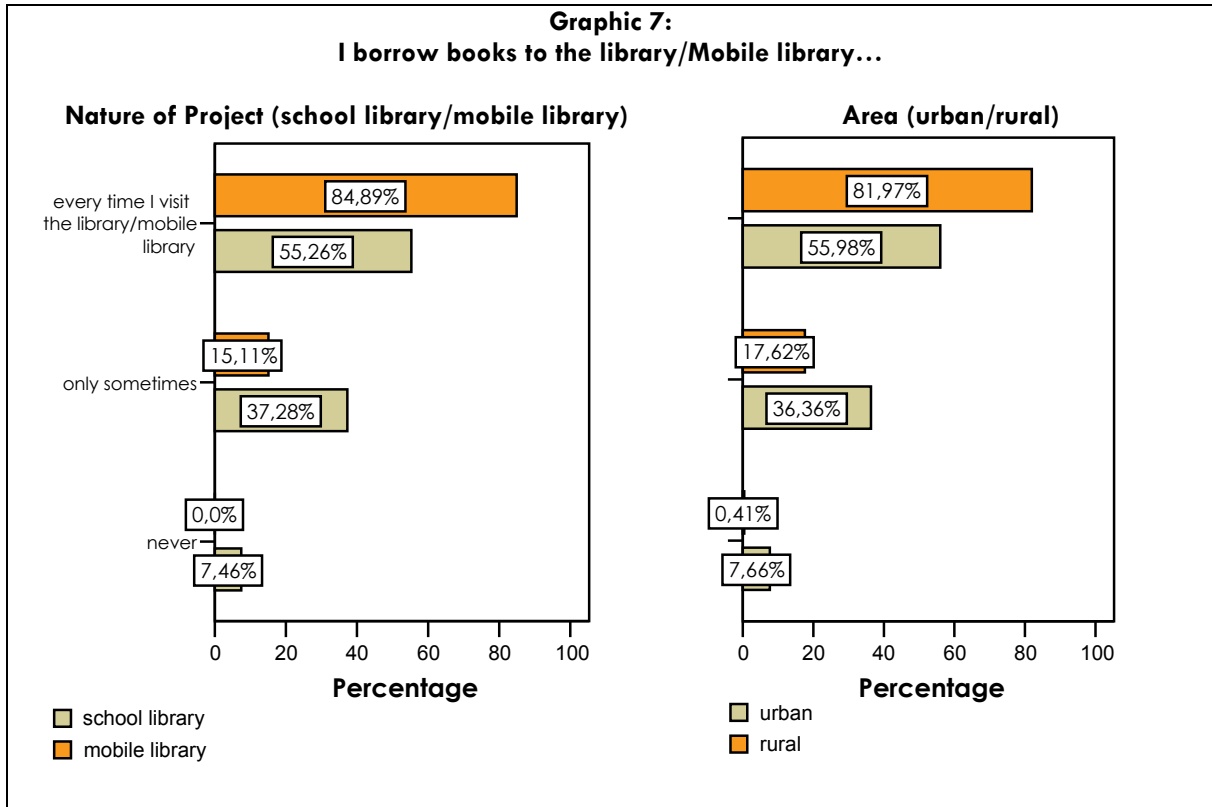
Considering the gender variable, it is possible to appreciate some significant differences. This because the percentage of women borrowing books once a week is higher than the percentage of men in about 6 point in percentage terms (see table 2).

Table 2: frequency of reading according to gender

| % | I borrow books from school/mobile library... | | |
|--------------|--|-----------------|--|
| | Never | Once in a while | Whenever I visit the school/mobile library |
| Girls | 4 | 23.1 | 72.9 |
| Boys | 3.5 | 29.4 | 67.1 |

Other important differences in respect to the frequency of reading percentages occur when considering variables of area (urban/rural) and the nature of the project (school library or mobile library).

As we can see in the following graphic, children with access to a mobile library present a percentage of weekly reading clearly higher than students with access to libraries in their schools (84.9% and 55.3% respectively). Likewise, the percentage of children in rural areas borrowing books is superior in 26 point in percentage terms from children in urban areas³.



Reading space – time

The reading space-time indicator corresponds to where and when children perform the act of reading.

In the following graphic it is possible to appreciate that near 86% of the children prefer reading at home and only 14.1% of the children choose school as a reading space.

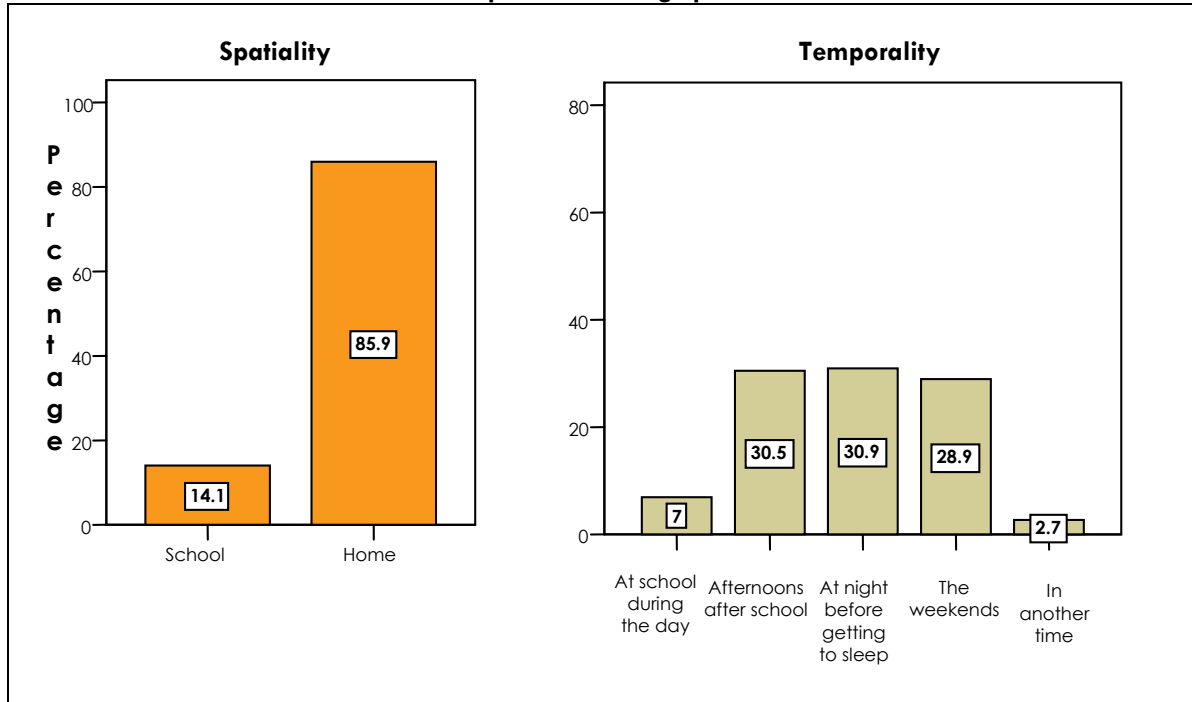
According to time it is noticed that 30.9% of children likes reading books at night before getting to sleep, 30.5% prefers afternoons after school, 28.9% opts for weekends and only 7% declares

³ It is important to remark that in this sample the variables, “nature of project” and “area”, are strongly related, because the indicator “mobile library” represents all the projects developed in rural areas, and “school library” represents near 90% of cases in urban area projects.

reading at school during the day. These data are very similar to reading time of adults, because most of the people older than 18 years old like reading at night (53.8%) and weekends (15%)⁴.

Considering data above, it is possible to state that reading is considered an activity associated to leisure time rather than duties and school homework by most of the children.

Graphic 8: Reading space-time



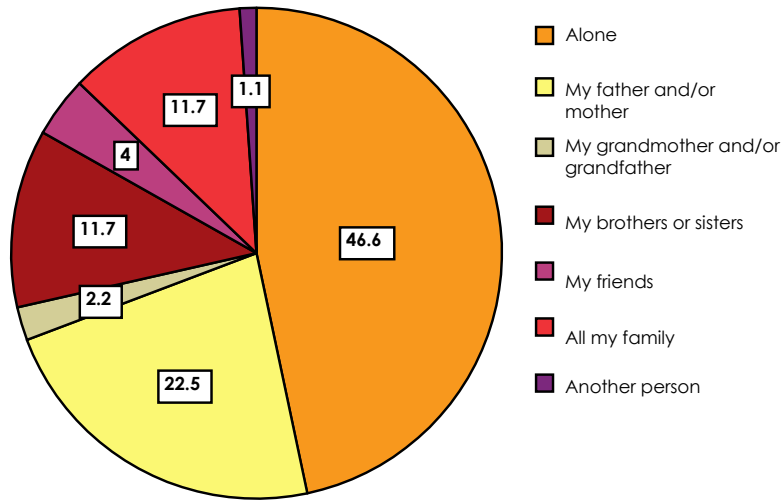
It is important to remark that there were no significant differences in percentage terms introducing cross variables as gender, grade at school, nature of the project (school/mobile library) and area (urban/rural).

Reading sociability

Investigating the sociability level of reading, it is found that almost half of children (46.6%) indicate that reading is an activity they perform themselves, without company. From the other half, it is observed that 22.5% declare that they read with one or both parents, in the same proportion children indicate reading with brothers, sisters or all the family, 4% with friends, 2.2% with grandparents and 1.3% of children name another person.

⁴ La Fuente Foundation / Adimark-GFK: "Chile and Books: reading indicator and books acquisition", 2006.

Graphic 9: Most of the time, when I'm reading a book I'm in the company of...



It is noticed that introducing cross variables to the analysis produces significant differences between percentages according to the grade at school.

Thus, percentage terms according to individual reading escalate as the grade move forward. Conversely, the percentage of children reading in company with parents or all the family escalates on lower grades (see table 3).

Table 3: Reading sociability according to the grade at school

| % | Most of the time, when I'm reading a book I'm in the company of... | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------|--------------|
| | Second grade | Third grade | Fourth grade |
| Alone | 33.8 | 44.3 | 61.4 |
| My father and/or mother | 31.8 | 22.1 | 13.7 |
| My grandmother and/or grandfather | 4 | 2 | 0.7 |
| My brothers or sisters | 9.9 | 12.1 | 13.1 |
| My friends | 2.0 | 8.1 | 2.0 |
| All my family | 16.6 | 10.7 | 7.8 |
| Another person | 2 | 0.7 | 1.3 |

4.3. Reading preferences

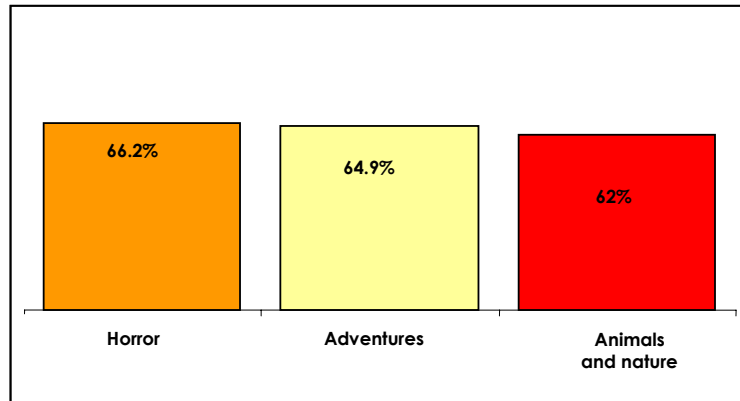
This investigation also considers among the variables of analysis the reading preferences of children from the point of view of topics as well as design and format of the books.

Topic preferences

In order to know the kind of books children prefer, they were asked for **three topics** in which they are interested when they choose a book for reading.

Considering obtained data, it is observed that children prefer books about horror, adventures and animals and nature.

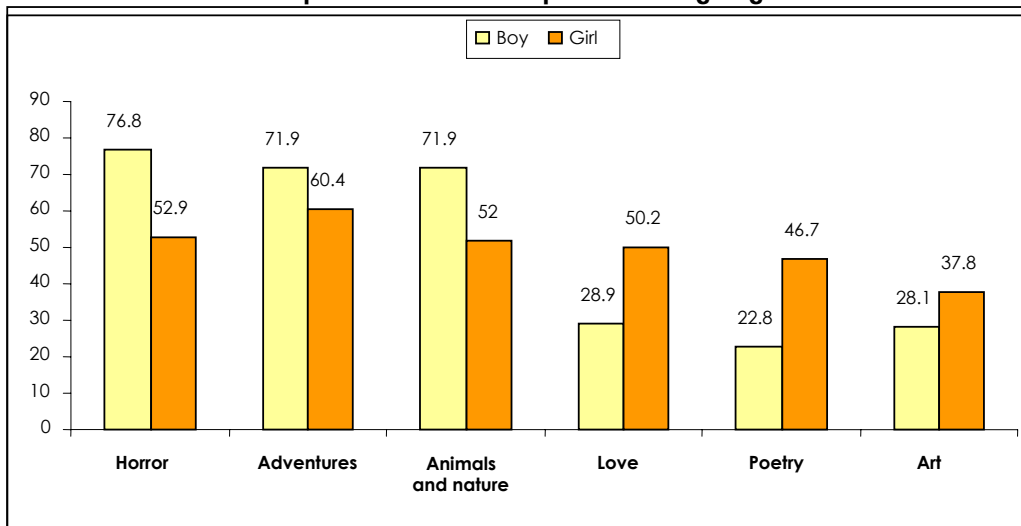
Graphic 10: Preferred topics



It is also possible to distinguish that books with the lowest percentage of preference among children are those related to art with 32.9% (see table 4).

Furthermore, if we analyze data according to the gender, it can be noticed that even though numbers indicate that the preferred topic are the same for male and female children. Male children have a more remarkable pleasure for those kinds of books, while female children also have a level of preference in poetry and love that fluctuates around 50%.

Graphic 11: Preferred topics according to gender



The order of preferences has some differences considering urban/rural area and grade variables.

Table 4: Summary of preferred topics (%/position), according to gender, grade and area.

| %/position | General | | Gender | | | | Area | | | | Grade | | | | | |
|--------------------|---------|----|--------|----|------|----|-------|----|-------|----|----------|----|----------|----|----------|----|
| | | | boy | | girl | | urban | | rural | | 2° grade | | 3° grade | | 4° grade | |
| Horror | 66.2 | 1° | 76.8 | 1° | 52.9 | 2° | 72.7 | 1° | 58.2 | 3° | 60.9 | 2° | 67.8 | 1° | 66 | 2° |
| Adventures | 64.9 | 2° | 71.9 | 2° | 60.4 | 1° | 63.2 | 2° | 68.9 | 2° | 60.9 | 2° | 6.4 | 2° | 71.2 | 1° |
| Animals and nature | 62 | 3° | 71.9 | 2° | 52 | 3° | 52.2 | 3° | 70.5 | 1° | 63.6 | 1° | 63.1 | 3° | 59.5 | 3° |
| Love | 39.5 | 4° | 28.9 | 4° | 50.2 | 4° | 46.4 | 4° | 33.6 | 5° | 42.4 | 4° | 40.9 | 4° | 35.3 | 5° |
| Poetry | 34.7 | 6° | 22.8 | 6° | 46.7 | 5° | 23.9 | 5° | 43.9 | 4° | 37.7 | 5° | 36.2 | 5° | 30.1 | 6° |
| Art | 32.9 | 5° | 28.1 | 5° | 37.8 | 6° | 41.6 | 6° | 25.4 | 6° | 34.4 | 6° | 26.2 | 6° | 37.9 | 4° |

From the table above it is possible to deduce some interesting results, for example:

- Children from rural areas mostly prefer books related to animals and nature. This situation can be explained because it is a topic closely related to the environment in which they live and develop.

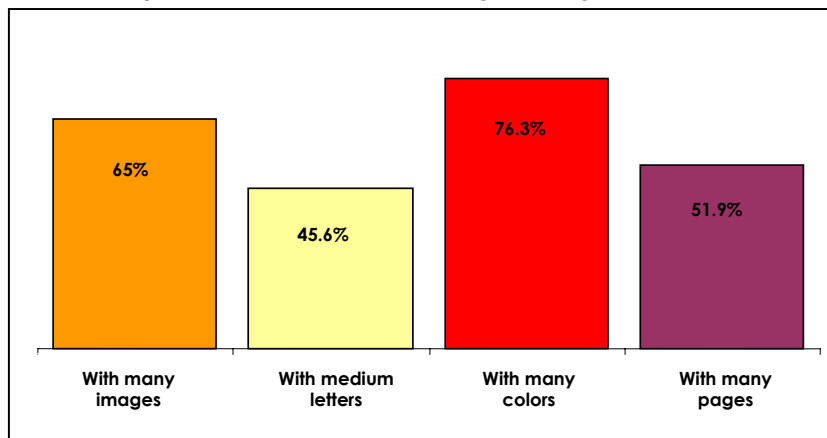
- 60.4% of girls indicate that adventure books are the kind of text they like reading the most. This number shows that interests according to gender not always match with social stereotypes, which associate women with more passive and emotional characteristics than men.

Preferences of design and format

As it was mentioned above, children were also asked about their tastes and preferences in respect to books design and format characteristics, such as images, colors, extension (number of pages) and letter size.

In the light of the data obtained from the survey, it is possible to appreciate that the ideal book for a child must have **many images and colors, medium size letters** and also **many pages**.

Graphic 12: Preference according to design and format



There are not significant differences between boys and girls when introducing gender as a cross variable. However, considering other variables such as grade or area, some interesting data appear.

Table 5: Summary of preferences of design and format, according to grade and area.

| | General | Gender | | Area | | Grade | | |
|----------------------------|-------------|--------|------|-------------|-------|-------------|----------|----------|
| | | boy | girl | urban | rural | 2° grade | 3° grade | 4° grade |
| With many images | 65 | 67.7 | 62.2 | 70.8 | 59.9 | 79.5 | 55.7 | 59.6 |
| With medium letters | 45.6 | 41.4 | 49.8 | 47.8 | 43.6 | 33.8 | 51.7 | 51.3 |
| With many colours | 76.3 | 76.7 | 76 | 79.9 | 73.3 | 83.4 | 71.1 | 74.3 |
| With many pages | 51.9 | 52.2 | 51.6 | 51.7 | 52 | 68.2 | 44.3 | 51.9 |

Consequently, more than 70% of children in urban areas prefer a book containing many images, but in rural areas this percentage decreases around 10 points in percentage terms among children.

According to the grade, children from second grade of primary school obtain high averages on every item except size letter where the preference is big letters (41.4%) contrasting with children from third and fourth grade.

V. CONCLUSIONS.

1. In the first place it is important to underline that reading is one of the three favorite activities for children. To be precise, considering the means obtained for each activity, reading is in second place of preferences, after “playing” and before “studying”. Furthermore, it is surprising that “reading books” had reached a higher average than “watching TV”, considering that a number of studies have proven that such activity consumes a big part of children’s and general population’s spare time .
2. The statement above is confirmed by averages obtained directly asking children how much they like reading, because more than 88% says they like it or they like it a lot.
3. When independent variables, like gender and area of residence (urban/rural), are introduced, it is interesting to observe the differences produced in the reading interest, because the categories female children and rural areas boys and girls are likely to prefer mainly reading compared to other activities. They also present higher averages in respect to the pleasure for reading compared with the categories male children and urban areas children.
4. According to the reading habits, the survey shows that 70% of children are reading in a frequency of one book per week. This number escalates to around 73% among female and up to 82% among children from rural areas.
5. Considering that weekly reading frequency is given within school days (there were calculated 8 effectives months), it can be said that 72% of girls, 82% of rural areas students and 70% of children in general are reading 4 books per month and 32 books per year.
6. Taking into account the data obtained on place and time where children’s reading is performed, it is possible to state that reading is considered, for most of the children, as an activity associated with spare time more than duties and homework.
7. Investigating the sociability level where children commonly read, the results indicate that a little more than the half of children read in the company with third persons, mainly direct relatives like the mother, father or brothers and sisters. It was also observed that the higher the school grade the lower the social level of reading is.
8. According to the topic of preference when choosing a book, it was observed that books presenting a higher level of interest for children are those about horror, adventures and animals and nature.
9. When preferences of topics are analyzed, according to gender and area variables, is possible to obtain interesting results, such as boys from rural areas mainly prefer books related to animals and nature, a topic closely related to the environment in which they constantly perform. Regarding gender, it was observed that girls like the most books about adventures, even more than those with regard to topics like love and poetry, which is a rejection to social stereotypes that associate female with more passives and emotional characteristics than male.
10. According to preferences of design and format, the ideal book for children must have many images and colors, many pages and letters must be medium size. Considering averages obtained on each aspect, it is noticed that illustrations (images) and color are the main deciding factors when children choose a book.

11. Finally, and considering that these results represent the reality of children benefited from reading promotion programs (meaning children with similar characteristics), it is pertinent to think about the necessity of a new investigation considering the connection between reading and those children who are not part of reading programs.

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