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Reading Comics To Learn

More than a billion comic books are sold each year in the United States (1). Obviously comics enjoy widespread popularity. The readership includes children and adults. In spite of the great appeal this reading material has for children, most teachers reject comics as instructional aids.

Teachers and others have given various reasons for rejecting comics and comic books. Comics distort established truths. The stories and the characters tend to question or undermine adult authority. They put undue emphasis on crime and violence. Comics simply have a poor reputation as disseminators of high-quality literature.

Accepting the reading of comic material as an entrenched activity in American life, Nila Banton Smith has suggested that comics be used to build interest in reading desirable stories and books (2). What might one expect if comics met the exacting standards of accuracy and literary style associated with the classroom textbook? Would they, then, be useful for classroom instruction?

To answer these questions, a study was undertaken at Florida State Uni-

versity. The researchers wanted to learn how well third-grade pupils would accept a comic-strip presentation as a source for learning how fish swim. Pupils' choices for a comic strip were compared with their choices for a class-adopted science reader and their choices for simple expository material of comparable readability presented on a typewritten page. Readability levels of the materials, determined by use of the Wheeler-Smith formula, were found to be somewhat higher than the grade level on which they were used (3).

The following null hypothesis was formulated for testing: When children are given a free choice to select a source of information offered in three forms—that is, textbook, comic, and expository—there will be no significant difference in the proportion of children selecting each of the three sources.

A comic strip, a classroom textbook, and a typed page, all presenting the same content, were used in the study. The comic strip was entitled "Our New Age," a Hall Syndicate release written by Athelton Spilhaus of

the University of Minnesota. "How Fish Swim" was the subtitle of the frame used in the study, which was conducted at Sealey Elementary School, Tallahassee, Florida, in the fall of 1964.

Sixty-three third-graders—twenty-seven girls and thirty-six boys—were shown the three types of material and were told that all three explained how fish swim. Each pupil was then requested to select the source he would prefer to read. In each interview, care was taken to protect children from the

the girls selected the classroom textbook as the preferred place to go for learning how fish swim. The chi-square test was used to determine whether the variance in choices made by boys and girls was significant. No significant difference was found, and a null hypothesis stating that there is no relationship between the preferences of the girls and the preferences of the boys was accepted with considerable confidence at the .05 level.

After applying the one-sample chi-square test, the major premise was rejected with considerable confidence at the .001 level. There was a significant difference in the proportion of children who selected each of the three types of material offered.

After the study, boys and girls who selected the classroom textbook were questioned about their choices. Children like comics for entertainment. They associate comics with fantasy, distortions of reality, and caprice. For authentic information these children still tend to place greater confidence in the textbook. For this purpose they prefer it to cartoons or expository material, even when all three sources contain the same information.

TABLE 1. *Distribution of Choices Made by Third-Grade Pupils for Three Types of Materials*

GROUP	NUMBER OF PUPILS	NUMBER OF CHOICES		
		Comic Strip	Text-book	Type-written Page
Boys	36	6	23	7
Girls	27	5	16	6
Total	63	11	39	13

influence of others in making selections. All interviews were held individually in a setting far from the disturbing activities of classmates. Choices were recorded and tabulated.

The summary of the choices shown in Table 1 reveals some unexpected information. Comics, a medium that many adults see as a poor form of literary and scientific reporting, were least well received as a source of knowledge by the third-graders in this study.

The researchers were quite unprepared to learn that third-graders found a typewritten page more appealing than a comic strip as a repository of scientific information. Sixty-four per cent of the boys and sixty per cent of

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2. Nila Banton Smith. *Reading Instruction for Today's Children*, pp. 401-2. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963.
3. Lester R. Wheeler and Edwin H. Smith. "A Practical Readability Formula for the Classroom Teacher in the Primary Grades," *Elementary English*, XXXI (November, 1954), 397-99.