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Student Choices: Book Selection Strategies of Fourth Graders

**Sherry Kragler
Christine Nolley**

In many literature-based reading programs, students are encouraged to self-select their own reading materials. However, self-selection causes apprehensions for many teachers. They are concerned not only about their students' ability to select books that are appropriate for their reading level but they are also concerned about the types of books the students may choose. Consequently many teachers may decide to use anthologies or whole class texts where they maintain some control over the students' reading material. However, student interest and student choice should be an integral part of an elementary reading program if students are going to be turned onto reading (Rasinski, 1988) and become lifelong readers.

This project investigated book selection strategies of fourth grade students involved in a literature-based reading program. The project examined types of information that guided the students' selection of books for their instructional reading program.

Rationale and theoretical base

Having students choose their own reading material is based in Olson's (1959) theory of child development. His theory states that children are "self-seeking, self-selecting, self-pacing organisms" (p. 402). Children will seek and select from the environment experiences that are consistent with their developmental levels. With teacher guidance, they will pace themselves through these learning experiences. With reading then, children will self-select books at levels that are appropriate for them as well as pace themselves through their chosen reading materials.

Allowing children to self-select their reading materials is a powerful motivator for children. It allows children the latitude to be deeply involved with the learning process, thus fostering an interest in as well as developing an ownership of the reading process that allows for growth in reading along many dimensions (Harmes and Lettow, 1986; Jenkins, 1955; New England Consortium, 1976). Students learn to make decisions regarding the types of reading they are going to do. They decide what ideas they will gain from the reading experience as well as learn how to develop different purposes for reading (Harmes and Lettow, 1986; Lazar, 1957; Ohlhausen and Jepsen, 1992).

Allowing students to self-select their instructional reading books can be a motivator for reading. Self-selection also helps to alleviate some of the pressure teachers have regarding students reading books of a particular difficulty level. When students have a strong interest in a particular book topic, finding books at a certain reading level becomes less important. Students' interests will help them read more difficult material (Belloni and Jongsmas, 1978; Hunt, 1970; Powell, 1971; Shnayer, 1967). In choosing books at an appropriate level, how do students decide? Students tend to pick books at

their independent, frustration as well as instructional levels. They tend to move across the levels in a pattern of moving from easy to more difficult back to easier books (Fresch, 1991; Jenkins, 1955; Mork, 1973; Smith and Joyner, 1990; and Timion, 1992).

Methodology

Subjects. The study took place in a fourth grade classroom in an elementary school in Indiana. The students were heterogeneously assigned to the class by the principal. There were seventeen students in the class. At the beginning of the project, to determine placement levels, the teacher listened to the students read. She scored significant miscues (substitutions, omissions, insertions, unknown words, and mispronunciations). She also listened for other recordable miscues, such as reversals, dialect, hesitations. A rate check was also done. Powell's (1971) criteria were used to make placement decisions. After listening to the students read, the range of the students' reading placement levels fell between the second and sixth grade level.

Classroom library. The room was stocked with books at a variety of difficulty levels as well as a variety of genre. Because of the range of the students' instructional reading levels, the difficulty levels of the books ranged from first through eighth grade. There were approximately 100 books in the class. The teacher rotated some of the books every six weeks. Books related to the students' interests were added to the class library during the year. Students also brought in books from home as well as from the public library to read. Parents donated books to the class library as well.

Description of the program. The reading period was divided into four sections. The first section took approximately five minutes. During this time, students needing books

would go to the class library to select their new books. Students who did not need books would begin to read at this time. While the students were selecting books and getting started with their reading, the teacher rotated around the room to monitor the students and to help them settle into the reading period.

Except for the classroom bay window, students could sit where they wanted to during their reading time. Two or three students could sit in the bay window but the students took turns as this was a popular place to read. While some chose to sit on the floor, most students stayed at their seats. If the students wanted to listen to quiet music during this time, a tape was used. The students read for 30-35 minutes.

During this time, the teacher held reading conferences as well as occasionally monitored the students at their seats. The students signed up for the conferences at the beginning of the day. The teacher used the conference to monitor the students' reading. The students were asked why and how they had selected the book. Next, they read a small portion to the teacher while she did a miscue analysis as well as rate check. After this, they discussed the book as well as discussed any difficult vocabulary. Finally, she had the students rate the book as well as ask who else might enjoy the book.

After the silent reading time was over, the students wrote in their journals and/or did other book related activities. This third component lasted approximately fifteen minutes. The reading period ended with a general book sharing time. The students as well as the teacher did book talks and generally discussed books the students were reading. Students also shared book related projects and occasionally participated in readers' theater.

In addition, the teacher presented focus lessons two or three times each week. These were mini lessons the teacher did to teach a variety of reading strategies, such as teaching students to summarize. The teacher did mini lessons at the beginning of the program to orient the students to the program. Some of these lessons covered book selection, preparing for conferences and exposing the students to the variety of genre in the library.

Determining book selection strategies

Book selection: How and why. To determine how and why students selected their instructional reading books, the teacher interviewed the students during their reading conferences. The students were asked the following questions: "How did you select this book?" and "What made you select this book?" If the students could not answer the first question, the teacher gave prompts to help the students generate an answer. For example, the teacher might ask if they had used an algorithm (an adaptation of the five finger method), had they skimmed the book, or leafed through the book to look at other clues to see if the book was going to be at an appropriate difficulty level.

The statements from these two questions were compiled and categories of responses were created. Glaeser and Strauss (1975) "constant comparative" was used as a guide for understanding the data. The students' comments were coded into tentative categories. As other students' comments were collected, they were analyzed and compared to the initial categories.

Book selection results: Categories of responses. In analyzing the data, students did not consider the 'fit' of the book very often. Even with the teacher prompts and the algorithm, the students focused on the topic of the book rather than if the

book was at an appropriate difficulty level for them. Consequently, only fourteen percent of the responses were about getting a book that would be a good fit. Students predominantly responded to why they selected a book.

From the results of the interviews regarding book choice, the following information emerged. The pattern seemed to follow results of other studies (Hepler and Hickman, 1982; Lynch-Brown, 1977; New England Consortium, 1976; Sampson, 1988; Wendelin, and Zinck, 1983). As seen in Figure 1, recommendations by peers as well as the classroom teacher were mentioned most frequently as the guiding factor in choosing a book. Many comments were: 1) others in the class had read the book; 2) a friend said that it was a good book; and 3) the book was good. The physical characteristics of the book was the second factor in the choice. The students' comments were: 1) the book looked neat; 2) I liked the cover of the book; 3) it looked exciting; and 4) I liked the pictures. The third category of responses was related to the specific topic of the book. Such comments related to information the student was going to learn from reading the book. These comments were related to general topics of interest as well as specific information students wanted. Some general comments were, I wanted to learn about football, dirt-bikes, ducks, money, the president ... Specific comments were connected to wanting information about specific people such as Abraham Lincoln and Magic Johnson. The fourth major category had to do with the 'fit' of the book. Only fourteen percent of the responses were in this area. In this, students mentioned how they selected the book. They mentioned flipping through the book, looking inside the text, reading the first and last paragraph as well as looking at the difficulty of the words.

The next category had to do with authors and book characters. Students seemed to like to read books by particular authors as well as following a character in other sequels in a particular series of books. Reading books based on TV and movies minimally influenced book selection strategies. Finally a small, miscellaneous category emerged. Unrelated responses to the other categories fell into this category. Examples of miscellaneous comments were: 1) I couldn't find anything else to read; or 2) I don't know why I selected the book.

Figure 1
Reasons given for selecting books

<u>Reason</u>	<u>Percentage of responses</u>
Recommendation	27
Physical Characteristics	23
Subject	16
Selection Strategy	14
Author/character	13
TV/Movie	4
Miscellaneous	3

Book selection: Reading levels. The second aspect of book selection dealt with students choosing books at appropriate difficulty levels. Three conference records were randomly selected to be used to determine the students' ability to self-select books at appropriate levels. The following data was collected: 1) readability check on each of the books; and 2) the teacher listened for significant miscues as part of the reading conference. As mentioned earlier, she listened for substitutions, omissions, insertions, unknown words, and mispronunciations. Powell's (1971) criteria were used to monitor the students' placement levels. The Flesch Kincaid readability formula was used in determining book difficulty level. As indicated in Figure 2, the students predominantly chose books

at their independent or instructional reading level. In choosing books, 62% were at the independent level while 25% were at the instructional level and 18% of the choices were at the frustration level (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Reading levels of chosen books

<u>Book choice</u>	<u>Book Level</u>		
	<u>Independent</u>	<u>Instructional</u>	<u>Frustration</u>
Book 1	8	2	3
Book 2	8	7	0
Book 3	10	2	2

*Note: Totals will be different due to student absences on conference days.

In analyzing individual patterns of these three books, six of the students consistently chose books at their independent level. There was a variety of patterns of book selection for the other ten students. Three of these students followed an easier to harder book selection pattern. The other seven chose books at a harder level and gradually moved to easier books. Due to the sample size of three books, no conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationship between book selection and reading growth during this program.

Conclusions and implications

Using a literature-based reading program that allows the students to self-select their books proved to be very successful with these students. The program was a motivating factor for these students because their attitudes toward reading improved. Some of the comments they made regarding their program were that they liked being able to pick their own books for reading. They enjoyed the fact they could read during their reading time rather than do worksheets. Book sharing was another aspect that the students mentioned as

being a positive of the program. The students eagerly looked forward to sharing their books with other members of the class.

The program also developed the students' awareness of themselves as readers. They enjoyed the independence they developed during this program. Several comments mentioned by the students confirmed this aspect. The students felt they had become better readers because they could read more often and had more time to read longer books. They could choose books of interest or for a particular purpose. Consequently, many students thought the self-selection process helped them become better readers. They were aware they were beginning to read more fluently. Being able to keep a notebook of difficult vocabulary encountered in their reading was another aspect they thought was helping them become better readers.

Some teachers may feel uncomfortable with having students predominately read books at their independent reading level during their instructional reading program. If so, they could teach and monitor the students use of an algorithm to determine if the book would be at an appropriate level. To become successful with this procedure, the students will need to practice and use this strategy over time (Henry, 1992; Mork, 1973). The five finger method is an example of such an algorithm. In this particular method, the students read a page from a selected book, as they read the page, the students hold up a finger for each word they don't know. If they hold up five fingers, the book is too hard (Richardson, 1983). Another approach is the Goldilock strategy. This strategy teaches children to recognize books that are too easy, just right, or too hard (Ohlhausen and Jepsen, 1992). Using algorithms are helpful but they would need to be amended for the length and type of books the students are choosing. In this class, the

students needed more prompting to use an algorithm as they selected their instructional reading books.

While algorithms may be helpful in guiding the students' choice, it is imperative that students not be made afraid to choose a book for fear of not getting just the right selection. Putting too much emphasis on choosing just the right book will defeat the purpose of the self-selection process. Many students will not attempt to select any books if teachers and media specialists continually question their choices or limit their choice of books by not allowing students in various parts of the library. If students, over time, are consistently making inappropriate choices then some gentle guidance may be needed.

To maximize reading growth, students should be reading books at all their reading levels. Occasionally, students attempted books near their frustration levels. The students read these books with difficulty but persisted in finishing the books. This provided them with a transient expansion reading experience (Powell, 1994). Since their interest was high and they were comprehending the story, there was no reason to subvert this effort. However, students should not continually read at this expansion level because they do need time to refine their developing reading behaviors. Consequently, students do need time to read easy books.

While this study did not address the issue of teacher selection of books for the class library, teachers do need to think about the books they choose to put in their rooms. If students are selecting from the classroom library and then making recommendations to their peers, what is included in the classroom library becomes very important. Teachers need to include books that fit the range of students in their classes. A wide variety of reading materials should be included to span

the range of students' interests. Some thought needs to be given to the literary merit of the books to be used in the classroom. Because of the number of considerations to be regarded, there should be some thought underlying teachers' book selection process. Students need to experience quality literature of interest to them and within their reading ranges to become truly literate people capable of making sound decisions regarding their reading.

In closing, students who are encouraged to self-select their own reading materials are more motivated and enthusiastic as readers. The process puts the learning responsibility on the reader thus providing early lessons in decision making and life-long learning. If taught effectively, most students are quite competent when it comes to selecting their instructional reading books suitable to their individual levels.

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