



Comparing Recreational Reading Levels with Reading Levels from an Informal Reading Inventory

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When children pull a book off the library shelf for recreational reading, what are they considering — length? ...jacket appeal? ...difficulty level? ...relation to their experiential background? All of these probably enter into consideration when the selection is made. The determining factor, however, for a freely chosen book, is quite likely to be the interest level of that selection for a particular child (Breen, 1967). Teachers acknowledge the importance of a motivating interest when they teach a directed reading lesson or prepare a child for an Informal Reading Inventory selection. Advocates of individualized reading programs have long stressed the importance of the interest factor in the child's self-selection of reading materials.

When a child selects a book purely for pleasure reading, to what difficulty level does the book correspond? It is not difficult to find writers suggesting that children's recreational reading levels should be the same as, or at least based upon, their independent reading levels as identified by an Informal Reading Inventory.

Several published IRI's (Ekwall, 1979; Johns, 1981; Silvaroli, 1982) equate the IRI's independent level with the

level at which a child should read books for leisure reading. Betts (1946) describes his basal level (which corresponds to the more recent IRI-designated independent level) as "the level at which 'free,' supplementary, independent, or extensive reading can be done successfully" (p. 446). In *A Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms* (Harris and Hodges, 1981) the independent level is described as the level which is "especially useful" when selecting material for leisure reading.

In his *Diagnostic Reading Scales* (1972), Spache describes that level at which to choose recreational reading materials as being *higher* than the instructional level and one which can be influenced by experience and interest. Powell (1971), on the other hand, speculates that the independent level is not static, but "floats."

Several research studies have investigated the correlation between recreational or independent reading choices and cloze levels. Breen (1967) investigated the choices of second and fifth grade students involved in an individualized reading program and found that over 50 percent of the students did not select materials at an instructional level, and 25 percent consistently chose materials which were at the frustration level. Ferguson (1977) studied the trade books freely selected by a group of sixth graders and used a cloze test to determine the level of difficulty of the books chosen (the cloze tests were administered before the children were allowed to read the books). The resulting data revealed that more than 50 percent of the students' selections tested by cloze procedures were within the independent level range (that is, students correctly supplied more than 57 percent of the deleted words), while 35 percent of those involved chose books within their instructional level range. Stockton (1982)

compared the recreational reading choices of Title I and Honor Roll junior high students. She found that 2 percent of the Title I students chose books at their independent level, as compared with 23 percent of the Honor Roll students (p. 4-8).

Belloni and Jongsma (1978) gave low-achieving seventh grade students limited choices of widely-ranged material. They found that the students showed better comprehension of material that they considered highly interesting than of material they rated as having low interest value.

While there are some who believe that a child's recreational reading is generally done at a level higher than the independent level, we were able to find no references in the literature to either substantiate or refute the equating of a recreational level with that of the independent level. Prompted by the thinking of those who do not view recreational reading as a limiting endeavor in terms of difficulty levels, and realizing that interest and motivation are not variables generally assessed with an Informal Reading Inventory, we decided to conduct a study regarding the recreational reading level.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to compare recreational reading levels in relation to the independent, instructional and frustration levels as determined with an Informal Reading Inventory.

Procedure

For the purposes of our study, 20 second graders and 20 fifth graders, from an elementary school in a southeastern state, were selected to participate. The *Basic Reading Inventory* (Johns, 1981) was administered to all students to

determine their independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels. Powell's (1978) differentiated criteria were then used to determine those levels.

Within a two-month period, the school's librarian kept track of the next three books chosen by each student. Those books were freely selected; the children did not know that their choices were being monitored. After the books had been returned to the library, the researchers estimated the books' difficulty level with the Fry Readability Graph (1977). (The Fry Graph was used because it was one of the means employed to estimate the readability levels of the *Basic Reading Inventory*.) By this means, we estimated the difficulty level of the books chosen for recreational reading by each child. (It should be noted that no procedure was used to determine if the students actually read each book.)

Subjects

Although 34 second graders were administered the *Basic Reading Inventory*, only 20 (9 girls, 11 boys) were used in the study. The 14 students were eliminated because they read at such a low level that neither an independent nor an instructional level could be determined for them. All 20 (8 girls, 12 boys) fifth graders to whom the *Basic Reading Inventory* had been administered were used in the study.

Results

Second grade students selected books for recreational reading within their independent reading level 40 percent of the time, within their instructional level 27 percent of the time, and at their frustration level 33 percent of the time.

Fifth grade students selected books for recreational reading within their independent reading level 42 percent of the

time, within their instructional level 30 percent of the time, and at their frustration level 28 percent of the time.

| | INDEPENDENT | INSTRUCTIONAL | FRUSTRATION |
|--------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| Second Grade | 40 | 27 | 33 |
| Fifth Grade | 42 | 30 | 28 |

Second grade students, when they could select books to read for pleasure, selected books above their independent level 60 percent of the time. Fifth grade students selected books above their independent level 58 percent of the time.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to determine whether students who had the opportunity to select their own library books for recreational reading would select books at their independent reading level. Or, as others have argued, would the students choose more difficult books due to such variables, perhaps, as personal experience, interest, and motivation? Based on the information gathered in this study, it appears that recreational reading varies so much that it is not legitimate even to discuss a recreational reading level — certainly not as synonymous with the independent reading level as determined from an informal reading inventory.

Powell (1971) appears to be correct in his statement that there is no empirical data to support the ranking nor the limits

of the independent reading level. It is sometimes below, sometimes at, and some times above the instructional reading level. Interest, value, motivation, and/or background for what is being read may very well be the main determinant(s) for a so-called recreational reading level. According to Breen (1967), Wrightstone (1957) and others have suggested that children do not read for instructional or independent purposes. They "read to fulfill personal purposes of [their] own. If given the opportunity to choose books which satisfy a purpose for [them, they often go] from a difficult book to an easy book and back again to a challenging book" (p. 25).

Since reading for pleasure is so personal, it is inappropriate for educators to base statements about the difficulty level of books students should select for recreational reading on the concept of the independent level as determined by an Informal Reading Inventory.

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.... EXPANDING HORIZONS

Pass the Read

This teaching idea is shared by Toni S. Walters, a faculty member at Oakland University, Rochester, Minnesota



Maintaining interest and involvement is frequently a challenge when the teacher elects to have students read orally. *Pass the read* is an instructional strategy for reading orally, which encourages high levels of student participation, decision making, and active listening because students have direct input as to when they will read orally, how much they will read, and if they want to read. Yet the teacher retains the instructional roles of facilitating and monitoring comprehension.