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The Role of Text Features in the Self-selection of Literary Genres by Second-grade Students

within a Gender-specific Context

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Introduction

It is clear that students who enjoy reading are more likely to do so in their free time than those who do not enjoy it. According to the Educational Testing Service, “The more types of reading materials there are in the home, the higher students are in reading proficiency” (as cited in NEA, n.d., n.p.). The National Education Association claims that the major component of becoming a good reader is having children read a lot (NEA, n.d.). Practice is the only way that children will retain improved reading habits.

In “The Importance and Use of Student Self-selected Literature to Reading Engagement in an Elementary Reading Curriculum,” Johnson and Blair (2003) state that, “Educators must focus their attention not only on how students read, but also why” (p. 183). They discuss how reading is so much more than a cognitive process. While it does require some thought and mental capabilities, interest and motivation must also be present.

While many would love to pick up a book and read to Mom or Dad, many others would do anything to avoid that situation. Students should not be written off as disinterested in reading because they claim to dislike it. We should strive to find out what students are actually interested in reading and why.

Students are more willing to read if they are interested in the book placed in front of them. People do not want to read a book that they find boring. In order to get students active, interested, and excited about reading, we must first find out what they want to read and why they are interested in what they read. In this study, we set out to discover what genre of books second-grade students were most likely to self-select, if there was a major correlation between genre

selection and gender, and what text features caused the children to self-select books. Our hypothesis was that the majority of both girls and boys would choose a book based on the cover photo. Even though we are always told not to judge a book by its cover, we hypothesized that most children would do just that. We also hypothesized that boys were more likely to self-select informational books than any other genre, while girls were more likely to self-select fictional narratives.

Literature Review

“Ain’t Nothing Wrong With Reading Books,” a study by Pytash at an alternative school, describes how it was decided to create a library that would appeal to the students who were sent there. The teachers wanted books on the shelves that children would actually be interested in reading. This was accomplished by a book pass. A book pass is a procedure in which children can sample a variety of books to determine which ones pique their interest. The teachers also wanted to know why the students were interested in particular books. So the teachers placed words and phrases such as book cover, book summary, and graphics on the board for the students to reference while they skimmed through the samples of books.

Once the chosen books were ordered and had arrived, the students participated in organizing and labeling books. The teachers listed genres such as sports themes, science, historical fiction and such for the students to categorize the books. One of the students attending the school said, “I liked it ‘cause I seen books I want to read, like all the sports books and *Al Capone Does My Shirts*” (Pytash, 2012, p. 33). Another student’s comment was, “I think it was fun ‘cause I got to see a lot of books I want to read, like *Slam* cause it is about my favorite sport, basketball” (Pytash, 2012, p. 33). The students were more interested in the books purchased because they were able to give their input during the selection and ordering process.

“Reaching Reluctant Readers in Middle School,” an article by Truax, focused on a seventh-grade classroom. The teacher was frustrated with a student who did not want to read during reading time. When the teacher asked, “What is it that makes you hate reading so much?” the boy responded, “I don’t know. None of the characters are going through things that are happening in my life. None of them are going through hard times. The only book I’ve ever liked reading is *A Child Called “It”* (Pelzer 1995). If you have anything like that, I might be interested in it” (Truax, 2010, p. 3). It is very clear that students would be more interested in reading if they could choose what they read about. Reading stories from old textbooks that have no relevance in their lives does not seem like a worthwhile task to many students.

In the last article I read, “The Story is More Important Than the Words,” a middle school librarian discussed why she believes self-selection of text is a much better option than leveling books. Annie Murphy Paul stated, “Another important point to emphasize: interest drives learning. If a student is interested in a subject or author or story, the reader is much more apt to push through challenging text than if no interest is present” (as cited in Grigsby, 2014, p. 24). This librarian was interested in her students’ reading interests, so she conducted a study to see what was most appealing to them. She handed out surveys to her students to gather information about their reading interests. After the surveys were returned to her, she took on the time-consuming task of matching all students with a list of books that may be of interest to each of them.

All of these studies and articles seem to agree that student interest plays a strong role in motivation to read. “Ain’t Nothing Wrong with Reading Books” even touched on why students like to read certain things; the teachers in that article analyzed what text features drew students to certain books. “The Story is More Important than the Words” discussed passing out a survey to

students to learn what interested them. However, these articles do not reveal the results of their inquiries. What genres were most widely-liked by students? What text features were commonly noted as the reason for self-selecting a book? Did boys and girls choose the same kind of books, or did they choose different ones? These are questions still lacking explicit answers.

Methodology

Philosophical Rationale

In our study, students' attitudes and behaviors toward reading and various genres were inspected. The Look-Think-Act sequence (Stringer, 2014, p. 9) was enacted to carry out the research. We first looked at two second-grade classrooms. There were plenty of books on the shelves, but were they filled with books that interested the children? As they were rifling through shelves of books, why did students self-select particular books? After observing in each classroom, my research partner and I devised a plan. We were curious to know which genres were most interesting to second-grade girls and boys. We wanted to know which genres they would self-select, if given the choice. We were also interested in determining why they chose certain books; what text features caught their eyes enough to encourage them to self-select that specific book?

Research Methods

Position of the researcher. My research partner and I met with two second-grade teachers at a private school in Collegedale, Tennessee. First, we met with Mrs. Hart in her classroom. We discussed what we were interested in researching and asked if she would be willing to let us interview her students. We then met with Mrs. Greggs in her classroom and discussed the same information with her. Both teachers were interested in the study; they wanted

to find out if the majority of their students were interested in a specific genre or if the choices would be extremely varied.

Participants. The student participants were drawn from the students in both second-grade classrooms. Parental consent forms (see Appendix A) were sent out to all of the students' parents. The children whose parents signed consent forms were then given assent forms to sign (see Appendix B). We discussed with the children what we were studying, what their part in our study would be, and how they could help us if they desired.

Out of 43 second-grade students, consent and assent forms were signed by 29 parents and 29 students. We interviewed all 29 of our willing participants; 16 were boys, while 13 were girls. Of the boy participants, 44% identified as Caucasian, 25% identified as Spanish, 19% identified as African-American, 6% identified as Asian-American, and 6% identified as other. Of the girl participants, 46% identified as Caucasian, 38% identified as Spanish, 8% identified as African-American, and 8% identified as Asian-American.

Data-gathering techniques. To gather our information, we interviewed each of the students separately so a friend's opinion could not sway his or her choices. Each interview was between 15 and 20 minutes in length and took place in one of the elementary school's copy rooms. When a child came into the room, there were 34 books on display; there were 11 genres present within those 34 books. The various genres were as follows: non-fiction/informational, biography, national history, historical, fictional narrative, humor, historical fiction, multicultural, poetry/rhyme, fictional art, and picture riddles.

We explained the process to the children when they arrived:

- First, you may take up to 10 minutes to select two books which you would most like to read.

- Secondly, we will then sit down and ask you a couple of questions about the books you selected.

Before we let them rifle through the books, we explained we were interested in why they choose to read specific books. We had a big paper with various text features listed: cover photo, title, author name, summary (inside flap or back), headings, subheadings, graphics, and text-to-self connection. We had the paper where it was visible while the children were looking through books and while we interviewed them so they could refer to it to help them remember why they chose a book.

Once the student had chosen his or her two books, we sat down to begin our interview. (See appendix C for survey questions.) While one researcher interviewed the child, the other researcher took notes on the child's responses.

Analysis: procedures for interpreting information. While interviewing each child, we had a paper specifically for him or her that contained his or her name, gender, race, and answers to the survey questions. After collecting all of our data, we both went through all of the information separately, and then we met together to see if our results matched. We created an Excel spreadsheet to categorize the genres and text features that were chosen. We wrote out what two genres were chosen by each child as well as the text features that prompted the child to choose those two books. Then, we counted the number of books chosen in each genre by each gender. Then, we did the same with text features. Lastly, we clearly wrote out all the genres that were chosen and what percentage of girls or boys chose that genre. We did the same process for text features.

Rigor. While our interviews with each child were approximately 20 minutes, we spent time in the classrooms beforehand. We observed the students at random times over a period of a

week. We got a feel for the classroom environment and the students' attitudes, and we asked the teachers some questions. While interviewing the students, all the information was written down and kept in a binder throughout the entire study. While analyzing and calculating how many students chose certain genres or text features, we created a spreadsheet to contain all the information in one place. Once we acquired all our data and analyzed it, we relayed the information back to the teachers. They were interested in seeing which genre of books their students would prefer to read if they had the choice.

Ethical issues. We changed the names of the second-grade teachers within our study. We recorded the names of each child that we interviewed along with their answers to our questions. When creating our spreadsheet of information, we labeled each child "Boy 1, Boy 2, Boy 3, etc." and "Girl 1, Girl 2, Girl 3, etc." It was clearly indicated from the start that no names would be revealed in our study itself. The only people with access to the information with names on it are the other researcher and I. Once the study was finished, all of the information received from the children was shredded. No personal information on any of the children is or was accessible by anyone other than the two of us conducting this study.

Results

Our original hypothesis was that the majority of children would choose a book based on the cover picture, the majority of boys would self-select non-fiction/informational books, and the majority of girls would self-select fictional narratives.

Our results were split into categories of boys and girls because we were looking to see if self-selection of books differed between the genders. We found that with these particular second-grade children, selection did not differ between the genders. The boys and the girls were very similar in the genres they chose and the text features that prompted them to choose those genres.

The 13 girls self-selected a total of 26 books (two books each.) Ten of the books (38%) were of the non-fiction/informational genre. Humor was the next highest chosen genre, ringing in at nine (35%) humor books selected. Following that, we had three (12%) fictional narratives chosen. Two (8%) historical fiction books were self-selected. Lastly, there was a tie of the genres poetry/rhyme and non-fiction/historical. One (4%) book of the poetry/rhyme genre was selected, as well as one (4%) non-fiction/historical book. (Totals do not add up to 100% due to rounding.) Our hypothesis that the girls would lean more toward selecting fictional narratives was incorrect. The majority of these girls were interested in non-fiction/informational books.

The 16 boys self-selected a total of 32 books (two books each.) Thirteen (41%) of the books were non-fiction/informational books. Twelve (38%) were of the humor genre. The rest of the genres had very small numbers chosen. Historical fiction, fictional biography, and fictional art all had two books (6% each) selected. Lastly, one book (3%) was of the biography genre.

Then, we looked at the reasons children self-selected the books they chose. Our hypothesis was that the majority of boys and girls would self-select books based on the cover photograph.

For girls, 17 (65%) of the 26 books chosen were chosen because of the cover photo. Five books (19%) were chosen because of the title of the book. Three (12%) of the books were chosen because of the author's name. (Students had read from this author before and wanted to read more of his or her books.) Lastly, one (4%) book was chosen because of the funny subheadings within the book.

For boys, 23 (72%) of the 32 books chosen were chosen because of the cover photo. Six (19%) books were chosen because of the title. One (3%) book was chosen because the child had read another book from the author and wanted to read more of his work. One (3%) book was

chosen because of both the title and the author; the title originally caught his eye, and then he saw the author was a familiar one that he loved. One (3%) book was chosen because of text inside the book; the child did not quite articulate if it was headings, titles, or something else within the text that convinced him to choose that book.

Conclusion

We set out to discover what genres second-grade students were most interested in reading and what text features prompted them to select those books. We also were curious to see if boys and girls were drastically different in their choice of genres. We realize a limitation of our research is that our findings may not be true to all second-grade classrooms across the country. You as the reader can decide if these results would be relevant to your school or classroom.

Our hypothesis that the majority of boys and girls would choose a book based on the cover photo was correct. During our interviews, 65% of the girls and 72% of the boys self-selected their books because of the cover photo. The second highest text feature that was used to self-select a book was the title of the book; this was the case for both the girls and the boys. Young children are more likely to self-select a book that has a cover photo that fascinates them because many of them will not go past looking at the cover photo to choose a book.

Our other hypothesis that the majority of girls would self-select fictional narratives was incorrect. The genre that was selected the most by the girls was non-fiction/informational. Ten of the twenty-six books chosen were of this genre. We also hypothesized that most of the boys would choose books that were non-fiction/informational. We were correct on this one. Thirteen of the 32 books selected by the boys were non-fiction/informational. With both the boys and the girls, the humor genre was the second preference.

As future teachers, we want our students to be interested in reading and to be excited about reading time. We want to have books accessible that our students truly have the desire to read. By doing this study, we hope to shed some light on what second-grade students are interested in reading and why. To our surprise, the boys and girls were interested in the same genres, for the most part. We highly recommend that other educators do a book pass within their classrooms to get a feel for what books would most interest their students.

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Appendix A

Parental Permission for Child Participation in Research

Research Study Title: The Role of Text Features in the Self-selection of Literary Genres by Second-grade Students within a Gender-specific Context

Introduction

This form will give you information about a research study that will be conducted. The information within may affect your decision about letting your child participate in this study. Information on the study is listed below; feel free to ask any questions you may have before you decide to grant or decline permission for your child's participation. If you allow your child to participate in the study, this form will be a record of that decision.

Purpose of the Study

If you agree to let your child participate, he or she will be involved in a study about self-selection of books. The purpose of this study is to find out which books second-grade students are most interested in and to find out if different genders prefer specific genres a majority of the time. Another purpose of the study is to find out why children are interested in certain books; we want to know if their interest stems from pictures, words, real-world connections, etc.

What is my child going to be asked to do?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to:

- Complete a short interview that may entail the following:
 - Identifying favorite books
 - Expressing why specific books are of greater interest
 - Answering questions about reading interests
- Possibly be audio recorded

What are the possible benefits of this study?

We may learn the specifics of what your child is truly interested in reading and why. If we know why children are interested in specific things, we may provide better learning material in the future. When children are interested in what they are reading, they have a more enjoyable learning experience.

Does my child have to participate?

No. Your child's participation in the study is based on your consent, as well as his or hers. You may both refuse. Even if you agree to allow your child to participate now, you may change your mind at a later date with no penalty. Your child must also agree to be in the study to qualify as a participant. He or she may choose to not be in the study, with no penalty.

How will my child's privacy and confidentiality be protected if he or she participates in this research study?

Your child's name will be changed within our research. Any papers or written data that have been collected will be shredded once the study is completed. If your child was audio recorded at any time during the study, it will also be deleted upon completion of the study.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

If at any point you have any questions, concerns, or comments about the research study that is taking place, feel free to contact one of the researchers:

- Tawsha Stiltz at tawshas@southern.edu.
- Isabel Rodriguez at isyr@southern.edu

Signature

Your signature below indicates you have read the previous information and you are willing to allow your child to participate. If, at a later date, you decide to withdraw your child from the study, that may be done. You will receive a copy of this document for your own records.

_____ My child may be audio recorded.

_____ My child may not be audio recorded.

Name of Child

Signature of Parent(s) or Legal Guardian

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix B

Child Assent Form

We are college students at Southern Adventist University. We are curious about the books you like to read. We are doing a study on second-grade students to see what your favorite books are, and we want to find out *why* those books are your favorites!

We may ask you to choose the book that you find the most interesting from a stack. We may ask you why you find it interesting, or we may ask you some other questions about reading and books. When we ask you these things, we may write down your answers so we can remember them later. We may also record what you are saying. Once we are done with our study, we will destroy all the things we have written down or recorded; nobody else will see or hear what you said to us.

Here are some things we would like you to know:

- You do not have to be in the study. You will not be in trouble for refusing to be in the study.
- Even if you start the study, you may quit at any time if you truly want.
- We asked your parents if you could be in our study. Even if they said that you could be in our study, you can still choose not to be in it.
- If you want to talk to one of us about the study while we are not here at A.W. Spalding, or if you have any other questions, you can email us at one of the following email addresses: tawshas@southern.edu or isyr@southern.edu. We will reply and answer your questions as soon as possible!

If you understand what you would be doing in our study, and if you want to participate, sign your name on the line below.

Your Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

Appendix C

Survey Questions

1. Do you like to read? Why or why not? (We wanted to start them with an easy question to put them at ease.)
2. Out of the two books you chose, which looks more interesting to you?
3. Why did you choose that book? You can refer to our paper to help you.
4. Why did you choose this second book?
5. What type of books do you think boys usually like to read?
6. What type of books do you think girls usually like to read?