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# HOW STUDENTS MAKE BOOK CHOICES

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An important goal of reading instruction is to bring students and books together in such a way that students will choose reading as a recreational activity. For students to become independent readers, they need to know how to choose and respond to literature. For teachers to develop situations in which students can respond to books and analyze their choices, they need to know what factors influence students' selection of books for personal reading.

Literature regarding criteria that influence young people's book selection is limited. When Maxwell (1979) asked sixth grade students why they decided to read a particular book, she found that these factors were important: 1) recommendation of a friend, 2) the length of the book (they checked the number of pages), 3) the print, 4) the cover, 5) the title, 6) chapter titles, and 7) the content of the first page. Ross (1978) found similar considerations in her survey of middle school students, but they added the following reasons: 1) easy to read, 2) contemporary setting, 3) main character of own age and sex, 4) a book they had heard of before, 5) paperback, 6) topic of personal interest, and 7) immediate action without "dull" introductory chapters.

In an effort to learn the extent and variety of factors that influence students' book selection, the study reported here was undertaken. The researchers also questioned students regarding what they liked to read about, what authors they liked, and books they had recently read and enjoyed.

A total of 688 fifth through eighth grade students enrolled in public schools in two small cities in Nebraska and California responded to a questionnaire. Numbers of respondents from both sexes were fairly evenly distributed across four grades.

## Results of the Survey

The following results are reported item by item from the questionnaire:

Item 1: Would you be more likely to read a book...if a teacher recommended it to you?...if a friend recommended it to you?

A majority of the students (69%) indicated that they relied more upon the friend's recommendation. Of the 31% who chose a teacher recommendation, half of them were in fifth grade. There

appeared to be a steady increase through the grades with regard to the influence of peer suggestion. Boys showed a slightly greater tendency to favor the recommendation by a teacher; whereas, girls were inclined toward peer recommendation.

Item 2: Which would you be more likely to choose to read?...  
a hardback book...a paperback book.

Paperbacks were preferred by a majority of the subjects (65%). Among the grades, eighth graders registered the highest preference for paperback books; fifth graders, the lowest. Girls (61%) favored paperbacks by a fairly wide margin compared to boys in the survey.

Item 3: Have you ever read a book after seeing a movie or TV show based on it?

The media appeared to have a substantial influence on choice of reading material with 77% of the subjects indicating a positive response. There was very little difference among the grades on this item. However, girls (56%) responded "yes" slightly more frequently than boys. The strong positive response by the total group was reflected in the book titles listed in the final item on the survey.

Item 4: Do you ever read a book more than once?

A strong majority of the students (80%) answered positively. Fifth graders responded "yes" only slightly more often than other grades. Eighth graders had the greatest number of negative responses. Girls (57%) indicated a few more rereadings than boys.

Item 5: Do you ever buy books with your spending money?

Fifty-eight percent of the subjects answered that they had purchased books with their spending money. There was little difference among the grades with regard to this behavior. Girls (58%) exceeded boys somewhat in book purchasing.

Item 6: Do you ever read more than one book by the same author? Name one or two of these authors.

A large majority of the subjects (85%) responded positively. All four grades were very consistent in their responses to this item. Once again, girls edged the boys in positive responses. Students listed 186 different authors whose books they favored. A summary of these authors according to frequency of mention by the subjects appears in Table 1.

Table 1  
Authors Named in the Survey

Judy Blume	207	E. B. White	16	Franklin Dixon	11
Beverly Cleary	92	C. S. Lewis	15	Wilson Rawls	10
Laura Ingalls Wilder	23	Agatha Christie	12	Carolyn Keene	8
S. E. Hinton	20	Alfred Hitchcock	12	Madeleine L'Engle	7
Charles Schultz	18	George Lucas	12	Ronald Dahl	7
				Robert C. O'Brien	7

Item 7: Number in order from 1 to 6 how important the items below are to you when you choose a book to read...thickness...if book has pictures...what it says on the first page of the book...the size of print...the picture on the cover...what it says on the jacket or back cover.

The subjects indicated the following as most important: "What it says on the book jacket or on the back cover" (53%), "how thick the book is" (15%), "what it says on the first page of the book" (12%), "the picture on the cover" (8%), "the size of the print" (7%), and "if the book has pictures" (5%). A similar pattern emerged in the ratings of those factors that were second most influential in the choice of reading material: "what it says on the first page" (25%), "how thick the book is" (20%), "the picture on the cover" (18%), "what it says on the book jacket or on the back cover" (14%), "the size of the print" (12%), and "if the book has pictures" (10%).

Item 8: Check the sentence that best describes you: ...I mostly read only books that I have to read because they are required by the teacher...I check books out of the library to read at home in my spare time... I have several books of my own at home that I enjoy reading in my spare time.

Only 14% of the subjects responded that they read only required books. Of these responses, more than one-half were given by eighth graders. Boys (73%) also indicated this behavior by a wide margin over the girls. Forty-five percent of the students indicated that the library was the primary source of their reading material. There was very little difference among the grades on this item. Of the respondents who selected this category, the majority were girls (60%). Forty-one percent of the subjects selected the third statement. Fifth graders (35%) responded that they read personally owned books most frequently. More girls (55%) than boys indicated that this item was descriptive of their behavior.

Item 9: What do you like to read about?

"Mysteries" were listed substantially more than any other type of story, named by nearly one-third of the respondents. Other popular topics included: animals, humor/comedy, adventure, love stories, sports, science fiction, and "kids my age"/teenagers. "Fiction" as a type of book was cited often. There was also a rather wide representation of nonfiction topics listed by the subjects, including: ballet, jazz, roller skating, conservation, computers and electronics, crafts, cooking, marine biology, motorcycles, and how-to-draw, among others.

Item 10: List the titles of three books you have read lately or that have been read to you that you really liked.

The subjects listed a total of 978 different book titles. A listing of titles named 12 times or more appears below:

Table 2

Books Enjoyed by Fifth-Eighth Grade Students

Where the Red Fern Grows 46

Star Wars

17

Forever	35	Hi Fella	16
That Was Then, This is Now	35	Blubber	15
Are You There, God?		Charlotte's Web	14
It's Me, Margaret	33	From the Mixed-Up Files of	
A Wrinkle in Time	33	Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler	14
The Amityville Horror	26	Black Stallion books	13
"Little House" books	25	A Christmas Carol	13
Tales of a Fourth Grade		My Side of the Mountain	12
Nothing	23	The Outsiders	12
It's Not the End of the		The Empire Strikes Back	12
World	22		
Peanuts books	18		

Among the other titles, media influence was apparent. Subject and title lists included "The Dukes of Hazzard," "The Incredible Hulk," "Mork and Mindy," "Superman," "The Love Bug," "Battlestar Gallactica," and "Star Trek," among others. Titles published in the adult market were also popular, including: Shogun, Wifey, Alien, Mommie Dearest, The Shining, and If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?

### Conclusions

According to the responses of the subjects in the study reported here, there are apparently some fairly definite factors that fifth through eighth grade students consider when they are choosing books for personal reading. They rely more upon peer recommendation than teacher suggestion and tend to select paperback instead of hardback books. Movies and television seem to prompt students to read books, and they may buy books with their spending money. They have a strong tendency to reread books and to read more than one book by the same author. Factors such as the description of a book on the book jacket or back cover and the content of the first page apparently weigh heavily in the decisions to read or not to read a book. The thickness of the book and the picture on the cover seem to influence the choice to a lesser degree, and the print size and number of illustrations are least important. Fifth through eighth grade students appear to have an extensive range of reading interests, both fiction and non-fiction, and choose from a wide variety of literature, written for both children and adults.

Findings from a study such as this one offer implications for teachers who wish to develop recreational reading habits in and out of their classrooms. Students need to be provided with opportunities to share what they have been reading with others. These need not be formal book reporting times. Instead, they can be brief moments of giving a summary statement and making a recommendation. In order to capitalize on the media influences, teachers might draw the attention of the students to a movie or TV special based on a children's or young adult book. Copies of the adapted book could be made available in the classroom or school library. A discussion comparing or contrasting the book with the media presentation would be an excellent critical reading activity to follow the viewing and reading. Students themselves might write book jacket blurbs and synopses for back covers so they can learn

how useful such information can be in telling about a book. They should also be made aware of various popular authors and their contributions. Further, continued exposure to the ever-growing body of nonfiction literature is vital as the interests of students change and their need for information expands.

## REFERENCES

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- Ross, P. A. Getting books into those empty hands. The Reading Teacher, 1978, 31, 397-399.