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The purpose of this study was to examine whether research regarding children's literature preferences matched what children were actually selecting based on eight weeks of circulation records at a Wake County, North Carolina elementary school. Results showed that older literature discrediting series books, magazines, and graphic novels as poor choices for children's literature go against circulation records that show what children are actually checking out of their school media center.

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Do Circulation Records Reflect What Children Prefer to Read? A Case Study of a Wake
County, North Carolina Elementary School

by
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Introduction

Understanding what children are choosing to read is an important part of educating and inspiring good reading habits in children. The sheer number of children the United States is responsible for educating each year is reason enough to study children's reading preferences but beyond that no one set of literature seems to be exactly right when it comes to understanding what children choose to read. By looking at what children are actually reading it will become easier to assess how collection development in a school media center or public library can best be utilized to meet the demands of young readers and help them develop and sustain healthy reading habits.

Children's reading preferences are periodically examined in research and literature but as times have changed and the way children gather information as changed, have reading preferences changed as well? Do the older studies still stand up when compared with what children are reading now? By examining circulation records from a Wake County public elementary school, children's reading preferences in a normal school setting will emerge and shed light on the topic of what children's reading preferences are.

Literature Review

Many articles and studies have been published examining the type of literature children prefer to read. In selecting articles and studies that pertained to what children preferred, it came down to the age groups of the children they were working with, the factors that they were looking at- age, gender, interests and preferences- and the methodology to discover children's preferences. But what constitutes a child's choice? Younger children are often given selections chosen for them by parents and other adults in their life. It is not until elementary school that many children have the opportunity to select reading materials themselves based on individual interest. While students may take the suggestion of teachers or other students, there is still the matter of selecting free choice or free reading titles.

Dowell and Garrison did a study in Raleigh, North Carolina, of one hundred and nine students ranging in age from seven to fourteen years and their reading interests. Specific items looked at included what children found most interesting- taken from a list of twenty three titles, which of the stories is the most popular, and if preferences of children making less progress in school differ materially from choices of those who are making the most progress in school. Questionnaires were supplemented with group questions and interviews. What they found was that most children were directly influenced by what was happening at home but across grade levels were unified in what elements they preferred in stories- in the case of this study, elements of kindness and compensation as preferred elements (1931). The most popular categories were Mauck

and Swenson's study was inspired by a "typical mid-western community [in which] members of the research staff noted what they considered to be a serious lack of recreational and supplementary reading materials in elementary-school classrooms" (Mauck and Swenson, 1949, 144). It observed children's behavior during the school day to see what books they selected for free reading and what books they chose to take home with them after school. Reading records were organized by title and student. The record showed which student in which grade read how much of the book. A longer record was available showing books he or she had read, how many pages were in those books and the average grade placement of the books. The findings indicated that when books were made available the average number read was about six. Lower grade children tended to read more books but older students usually chose more difficult books with the average difficulty level being a half-grade higher for the choices of fourth through sixth grade children. Eighth-graders showed a preference for titles that were close to being a full grade higher in difficulty level than those chosen by intermediate children. Significant points found in this particular study (according to Mauck and Swenson) were that elementary-school pupils took advantage of suitable additional reading materials if offered. Children in grades four through six seemed to choose books that were approximately the same grade level but as the study moved into grades seven and eight it was found that students chose more difficult books. Other findings were that fiction seemed to have the greatest appeal at any grade level but that recreational reading was ranked low among children in comparison to other recreational activities such as sports, radio-listening, games, and movies. Another interesting finding was that those children in each grade who read the most could only identify roughly two out of five books by a

recall technique a year later. They did, however, remain better able to recall what they had read than those children who did little free reading.

Wolfson's study asked two thousand students to take a Reading Interest Inventory orally and have their parents turn in a questionnaire. The responses gave information about what kind of background students came from. Information asked for included parental education levels, occupations and books in the home. The results showed student selection when examining twelve categories. The categories were adventure, animals, fine and applied arts, fantasy, family life and children, famous people, machines and applied sciences, personal problems, physical science, plants, social studies, and sports. The results showed that the interests of girls and boys overlapped in a variety of categories, including social studies and fantasy. Contrasts between girls and boys interests became apparent moving into categories such as machines and applied science, arts, and family life and children. The other clear finding from this study was that not a single category appealed exclusively to either boys or girls (Wolfson, 1960, 81).

Ashley's study divided up children's reading interests by grade and gender. Nine hundred elementary children in grades four through seven were asked to examine forty reading topics or kinds of reading and give their preferences, without input or guidance from adults and as little explanation as possible. The results were ranked in order of grade, popularity and gender. The results showed that animals were still highly ranked in terms of popularity but fiction topped the list with girls being the gender that most preferred the genre. But in this case, boys showed more interests than girls. The findings of the study gave guidelines to teachers to help them understand the preferences of their students better and to think of ways to encourage reading. Series books were considered

“not recommended [but] ... ought to be recognized as a perfectly natural stage in most children’s reading development” (Ashley, 1970, 1096).

Fairleigh, Evard and McDaniel did a study to inventory what fourth, fifth and sixth graders were interested in reading. A questionnaire was administered, data were tallied and from that information it was determined what the most frequently named topics were. In this study mystery, animals, science, fairy tales, sports, history, humor, adventure, science fiction, monsters and ghosts, and cars and racings were the most frequently named categories. Slides were shown representing the different categories and students were asked to name what category they thought each picture represented. 150 students participated in this study, and then consented to follow up interviews one week after the slides and information were “inventoried”. The major findings of the study were sex differences in reading interests in grades four through six that fell into line with social expectations for boys and girls in society. Unfortunately no consistent differences appeared between fourth and fifth grade students which may have been due to the small sample but the interviews done after the picture inventory gave insight into the reading interests of children compared with the pictures shown (1974).

The Beta Upsilon Chapter of Pi Lamda Theta sponsored a study in 1974 analyzing children’s reading preferences within age and sex groups, similar to the Ashley study (1970). They analyzed the results of 811 children from the age of seven until they went into adolescence. This informal study of children’s reading interests was done based on the reading preferences of ten or more children who volunteered to fill out the interest form per member of the Beta Upsilon Chapter of Pi Lambda Theta. Lauritzen and Cheves found that seven-year-old boys liked books based on content over any other

aspects, such as humor or plot. Animals were indicated as a point of interest- in particular dogs, horses, turtles, bears and dinosaurs. Seven-year-old girls, on the other hand showed an interest in plot as a reason for liking or disliking a book. Content and characters were also mentioned. Girls often chose titles in the animal category as well, meaning that the results were similar. One difference found was that girls mentioned character or plot more often than boys (695). Eight year olds showed somewhat similar findings- boys listed humor and content as reasons for liking books. Animals, history and science topped the categories they preferred. Girls, on the other hand, mentioned humor, and continued to list good story lines, style and characters as a reason for enjoying books. Both favored content and humor. At age nine boys began to show more of an interest in plot as well as humorous and imaginative literature. Girls continued to show an interest in character and plot but did not seem to care if characters were their age or not. Stories about animals remained most popular, and girls showed more of an interest in mystery and people than boys (696). Ten and eleven year old boys showed a greater preference for mystery than before, but continued to enjoy titles dealing with animals and science and favored more exciting books. At eleven, boys showed a preference for content but still did not mention plot or characters as significant reasons to enjoy a book. Girls remained steady, pointing to content, plot and character as a reason to continue reading a book. Stylistically they preferred excitement nearly two times as much as humor when asked which traits they preferred in reading materials. The girls studied were more interested in plot and characters than the boys were, but boys showed much more of an interest in science fiction, fantasy, history and sports. Girls tended to lean towards make-believe, romance, and domestic stories. By twelve interests were much more scattered

for both boys and girls. Certain characteristics, such as content, were similar across the age groups and animals remained the most popular category (699). Girls did mention plot and characters a great deal more than boys but the overall traits preferred were excitement, humor and information. One difference is that as children aged, they became much more critical of titles than younger students. Animals remained the most popular category across the age groups used in this study (700).

Over eighteen semesters at the University High School, University of Iowa, data were collected and became the source of Means' article. His article looked at how to develop the habit of reading and have students enjoy what they're reading. This is an imperative part of helping students become better readers. Means (1976) examined reading classes in which students were free to select books they wished to read and given a day plus an hour of class to complete their reading choice. This was followed by an oral book conference with their teacher. Students were asked what they would do when given the opportunity for individualized reading, what types of books they might select, how much reading they would do, and if individualized reading would produce a more prolific student reader in urban and suburban settings. Data collected from an older study suggested that if students were allowed to self-select, their interest in extracurricular reading went up. The information included in this article was a list of the thirty-five popular titles (Means, 1976, 147). The list was examined to discover what students read year-to-year in high school. Means found that though titles selected changed year to year, some titles and authors are read for the duration of the high school years, such as Kurt Vonnegut and Richard Brautigan (two authors popular during the years of the study, 1963-1972). Contrary to some publishers' statements that students preferred non-fiction,

high school readers in this study showed a strong preference for fiction when allowed to self-select. It was also found that students continued to request oral book conferences with their teacher even when the unit was over. No conclusion about whether or not this would make a more prolific reader could be made from the data collected by Means.

Ninety-three fifth and sixth grade students in a small Midwestern city were the subject of Stevens 1981 study on reading interests among fifth and sixth graders. The two tools of assessment used were a picture rating scale and traditional questionnaire. This allowed students to rate their interests in particular topics more accurately. Differences in reading interests were discovered between boys and girls but some subjects in which Stevens expected to find differences did not show significant differences. This possibly indicated a lessening of sex-based interests. Stevens found that outer space and galaxies were the most popular topics. This may have connections to certain media such as the “Star Wars” movies and “Battlestar Galactica” television show (Stevens, 1981, 148). The hope was that in helping demonstrate how topics of interests change and how they can be applied to newer reading materials, teachers and librarians would be able to make better book selections in order to provide more relevant reading materials to students.

Wolfson and Manning’s 1984 study entitled “Revisiting what children say their reading interests are” looked at 415 fourth graders in the Birmingham, Alabama City Schools system. This was a duplication of Wolfson’s 1960 study in the Norwalk, Connecticut City Schools. In this study children were asked to respond yes or not to questions about the following categories: “adventure, animals, fine and applied arts, fantasy, family life and children, famous people, machines and applied science, personal problems, physical science, plants, social studies and sports”. It used what is referred to

as the Wolfson instrument, a dependent measure of 120 questions designed to show gender and race differences of reading interests. According to Wolfson and Manning, the implications for educators included an awareness of what children are interested in reading about and a desire to provide appropriate reading materials. The second implication was recognizing the importance of the reading preference overlap in boys and girls and minority and nonminority children. The third implication they believed to be one of the most important for educators. For educators who were looking at “basal readers” (readers who fall below grade level) and determining what topics they were interested in. The hope was that by finding out what topics basal readers were interested in, it could improve collection development. Finally, Wolfson and Manning found that by observing what children chose when asked to select their own books, teachers gain natural insight into what they are inclined to read about and what they are interested in outside of the classroom. Wolfson and Manning do point out those using the tool should consider the reliability of the interest inventory since children’s interests are not stable and subject to change on a regular and inconsistent basis (5). Their findings were that reading interests did overlap, but boys and girls showed gender differences in reading choices. Minority and nonminority children revealed more similarities than differences in reading interests. The implications of this study revealed that teachers need to be aware of what children are interested in, that book choices should not be constrained based on ethnicity or gender, and that educators should be sure basal reading texts correlate with what children like to read. Finally it revealed that teachers should observe children as they are selecting books to determine what they are interested in reading about and using those interests to improve their curriculum (Wolfson, Manning and Manning, 1984).

Fisher (1988) examined whether sex, grade, race and teacher variables influenced what children were reading in third, fourth, and fifth grades. Using a sample of 207 students attending an urban elementary school, he looked at how the children were divided into “clusters” with team teachers, and how balance was maintained. The children were then administered a reading preference survey that allowed them to mark their preference for reading within eleven categories of interest. What was found was that fifth graders did not enjoy biographies, animals or fairytales as much as younger grades, and there were also gender differences. Boys preferred books relating to history, science, and sports while girls showed a preference for books in the biography, craft, joke, fairytale, animal, and poetry categories. The findings of this study would be considered useful to librarians and teachers in terms of collection development for independent or recreational reading. Fisher found that teacher influence was an important aspect of choice in regards to developing reading interests (Fisher, 1988, 69).

The goal of the study “Research Directions: Children’s selection of trade books in libraries and classrooms” was to take a closer look at how librarians and teachers guide book selections for their students (Hiebert, Mervar, and Person, 1990). Second grade classrooms were divided by teachers’ book-selecting strategies. Half of the teachers who participated viewed self-selected reading of trade books as fundamental to their literacy programs. In the other classrooms, self-selected readings were seen solely as recreational and not incorporated into the curriculum. Book selection strategies were further clarified by examining the children in several contexts- in their libraries, classrooms, and outside schools and libraries in order to incorporate information picked up at home, or at locations other than school, such as the supermarket or drug store. The

findings showed that literature based classrooms used trade books as a routine part of the literacy program and that teachers read aloud to students in order to develop discussions about book styles, contents, plots, authors, illustrators, etc. It engaged students in identifying different ways in which tales were created and adapted. In text-book based classrooms, or classrooms in which teachers view trade books as strictly recreational, the read-alouds came from the textbooks themselves and thus were not as dynamic. Children from both sets of classrooms, however, did note the influence of their librarian on personal reading choices. The role of the school librarians became more important as students began to work on research. It also found that students who consistently read trade books were more likely to be conversant about authors and topics, even at an age when many would not expect it.

Carol Haynes and Donald Richgels did a similar study of fourth graders in 1992, looking at students' literature preferences as opposed to genres and categories preferred by educators and librarians. It was a sample of 253 girls and 239 boys expressing interest on a fictitious annotated titles inventory containing 68 items. From the original 26 children's literature categories, the following categories were represented in both genders: traditional and modern fantasy, realistic fiction about romance and adjustment, historical fiction, science and health, and biography. The findings were that content may be a more powerful factor in literature preferences than traditional classifications and genres used by fourth graders (Haynes and Richgels, 1992, 208). An important finding from this study is the similarity of items determined to be top-ranking factors for both boys and girls. For both genders top-ranked factors came from traditional and modern fantasy, realistic fiction (in particular concerning adjustment and romance), historical

fiction, and from science and biography. Boys showed a preference for sports, mystery and suspense items, and realistic animal fiction. These factors did not appear in the girls' preferences. The girls' preferences included historical non-fiction, a social studies item about people living in the United States, and science. There was no overlap in these findings (216). The study also demonstrated that factor analysis can be a powerful tool in examining children's literature and gave insight into how to help children succeed in selecting reading materials.

Saccardi's 1993 article on how reactions to books can influence what students should be reading focused on why children found certain titles boring. The answer Saccardi found was that often what children mean when they use the term "boring" is that the book does not have an exciting plot or adventure. Saccardi's argument is that if a child finds a book boring they should be taught it is acceptable to put it down and pick something else. This teaches young readers that not every book works for every reader but that there is a book for every reader (Saccardi, 1993, 320). One suggestion Saccardi makes is that teachers should spend more time discussing what makes a title good in the classroom. Doing this allows them to give various examples of titles that may be good for different readers.

Lane Allison's "What are they reading? Literature preferences of Charlottesville Area Children". looked at sixty-two third to sixth grade students using the public library. The reasoning behind the choice to use the public library was that in this instance the public library afforded fewer restrictions on the children's book selection process, fewer influences from others, and greater diversity since home-schooled children came into the public library but would not have been counted in a school library setting (Allison, 1994).

The books were divided into fiction and non-fiction categories, thus making it easier to compare to a similar study done in 1974. The categories were contemporary realistic fiction, folk/fairy tales, historical fiction, mystery, suspense/ghost, fantasy/science fiction, sports, poetry, biography/autobiography, information, movie and humor. The sixty-two children reported a total of eighty-seven books and literature types (Allison, 1994, 18). The Charlottesville study found that children leaned towards information followed by contemporary realistic fiction (21). Here the percentages fell between twenty-five and thirty percent. This was higher than the “Children’s Choices List”, which was used as an indicator in Allison’s study. The Children’s Choices is a list made up of the top 100 books chosen from submitting publishers each year. A joint project with the Children’s Book Council and the International Reading Association, the list is selected by children and considered a valuable guide for people working with children’s literature such as librarians, school media specialists, teachers and parents when looking at children’s literature (2).

Describing categories of interesting reading materials for reluctant readers, Worthy (1996) found that emergent readers benefited from shared reading experiences and repetitive materials. They also benefit from reading books they are interested in. Worthy looked at texts children were interested in reading. She found that they were most interested in reading materials considered “light” such as comic books, series books, and magazines. But there are reasons for maintaining a collection of series books and reading that is not necessarily considered part of an educational curriculum. Series books have been a reading staple for readers for centuries. Characters, language, plot become more

familiar with each book read. For inexperienced or struggling readers this sense of familiarity with characters can inspire continued reading.

Worthy also found nonfiction to be a genre that is often overlooked as materials to help reluctant or struggling readers. These types of books- specifically books about sports heroes and animals are often checked out of collections, showing that there is a demand for nonfiction. Certain authors were also found to be appealing to reluctant readers. Roald Dahl and Bruce Coville were two examples cited. Worthy hoped to introduce other ideas for reluctant readers such as adult books as alternatives that might appeal to adolescent readers wishing to get away from “children’s literature”. For middle and high school students authors such as John Grisham, Michael Crichton, and Stephen King are popular choices. While these authors may not fit into a school curriculum, they might be something to suggest to reluctant readers as free reading choices (Worthy, 1996, 211).

Nancy Boraks, Amy Hoffman, and David Bauer from Virginia Commonwealth University and John Carroll University conducted a study of children’s book preferences in 1997. It asked about reading preferences in elementary-aged children. This study was used to inform educators on all levels and those responsible for collection development about factors that influence specific reading influences on children and the reason for those individual preferences (315). Using a questionnaire, third, fourth and fifth grades were focused on, with 315 children sampled. It compared children’s preference for particular books and reasons for liking certain genres or books. Titles were then categorized into different genres to look for patterns as the children continued through elementary school. One trend that was not statistically significant in this study showed that children move away from picture and fantasy titles and towards realistic fiction as

they age. When gender was applied some significant differences emerged, especially when considering genre in reading habits. The most significant variables found were in individual classes as opposed to grade level or socioeconomic status (both of which were considered in this study). This could lead to further analysis of implications for educators (309). The results of the study were tabulated using citation frequency and genre. Genre categories used were picture books, realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, poetry and nonfiction (including biography). Since in this study very few children named historical fiction, poetry or nonfiction in their favorites, those categories were combined and labeled as “other”. After genre was determined, Boraks et. al found reasons for liking the book were categorized into smaller details such as plot, character, style, etc, and comparisons were made based on grade level, gender, and geographical region.

As predicted, findings showed that tastes changed across grades in terms of genre and title preferences. Interestingly, though, while individual titles showed a large amount of diversity across grades and individual classes some authors were mentioned a more significant number of times. Roald Dahl and R.L. Stine were mentioned at all grade levels. *Charlotte’s Web* by E.B. White, and *The Best School Year Ever*, by Barbara Robinson were individual titles listed in each grade level. Developmental or grade differences were found when the difficulty and complexity of individual titles was considered. What this suggests is that reading proficiency may play a more important role in developmental studies (Boraks, Hoffman, et al, 1997, 320). Gender contributed to significant differences in grades three and five. Interestingly, boys across the geographic areas studied by Boraks et al. were much more alike and changed very little over the grades while girls changed slightly more. Boys tended to select more fantasy-oriented

titles while girls leaned towards realistic fiction but both genders increased the naming of realistic titles as they moved into higher-grade levels. Another find worth noting was that girls tended to “abandon” their interest in fantasy titles in order to accommodate a stronger interest in realistic fiction, making the gender difference consistent with earlier studies (321). It also confirmed a greater awareness of the importance of teachers in the classroom and how heavily their own leanings and recommendations can affect what students select on their own.

Looking at the relationship between achievement in English and the reading habits of 10- to 14- year olds, Coles and Hall argue for the recognition of and importance of range in what students read. By paying attention to what children are picking up when they make their own selections. Closer attention to what literacy really means in the context of reading choices means assisting students in making better choices and thus improving their view of reading, English and possibly increasing standardized test scores (96). The context of the study was to look at why girls were more likely to under-perform in math and science after a certain grade level in England. The focus was on two particular features of the findings in the *Children’s Reading Choices* research. The *Children’s Reading Choices Project* was a study done in 1994 by Coles and Hall to look at the relationship between achievement in English and the reading habits of 10-to 14-year old students. The project was an examination of those findings in comparison with F. Whitehead’s (1977) study. Using a national questionnaire, Coles and Hall received more than 7000 responses. What was found was because of this study was that the belief that reading habits had declined was unfounded, particularly in the younger children studied. There was actually a slight increase in average book reading from 1971 to 1994

(the years this study examined) and an increase in newspaper and magazine or periodical reading (100).

This article looked in particular at how gender affected children's reading choices. Coles and Hall found significant differences in the types of books selected by boys and girls, with girls choosing more adventure, horror/ghost animal and school-related stories and slightly more poetry. As in several other studies cited in this paper, boys chose more science fiction and fantasy along with war stories and sports. Their findings were that reading patterns and practices are very much related to gender and become more divided as children move into adolescence (104). It also found that both boys and girls tended to choose fiction when allowed to select their own reading materials. This suggests that primary classrooms are a key setting for helping children develop solid reading habits that will carry them through their secondary and higher education. It also suggests that home and community literacy practices should be complemented and enhanced by school literacy practices. Reassessing how fiction fits into the literacy curriculum in order to encourage more balance of genre might be one way of doing this and giving teachers opportunities to acquire a detailed knowledge of the extracurricular reading habits of students in order to further encourage extracurricular reading (107).

Another study pertinent to the examination of children's literature preferences is Harkrader and Moore's "Literature preferences of fourth graders". This study was designed to assist teachers in promoting reading by selecting literature that they preferred. By making better selection choices, teachers will be able to encourage further interest in reading topics (1997). Harkrader and Moore developed a survey with fiction

and non-fiction titles in 21 categories. They then conducted the study in seventeen randomly selected elementary schools in Ohio with a total of 405 students surveyed. The study found that both genders had a strong preference for fiction and that there were significant differences in gender preferences in the fiction categories. The Fiction categories were mystery, animal stories, friendship, sports, historical fiction, folk tale/myth, science fiction, fairy tales, other worlds, adventure and realistic fiction. Nonfiction categories used were animals, how-to science experiments, people in other lands, plants, earth science, the human body, space, arts and crafts, sports, weather, history, and biographies. The results were based on children's answers in the range of 1-5. A 5 represented a response of desire to read and as the numbers went down so did the sureness about wanting to read the category or title. The findings were that both boys and girls in fourth grade preferred fiction over non-fiction but the types of fiction preferred varied. Girls indicated a stronger preference for six of the categories used in this study- friendship, fairy tales, animal stories, mystery, adjustment and historical fiction. The boys indicated a stronger preference for sports and science fiction but not the friendship or fairy tale categories. The most significant differences in this study came in regards to the non-fiction categories. Boys preferred sports, space, earth science, weather, and animals while girls showed a preference for art and hobbies. These findings suggest that though there are gender differences in the literature preferences of boys and girls, both prefer fiction over non-fiction, that reading selections should be more carefully selected to encourage both genders to read, that there are some areas of overlap. One example was that both boys and girls enjoyed reading stories in which the main character is a character of the opposite sex.

In Robinson, Larsen, Haupt and Mohlman's 1997 study "Picture book selection behaviors of emergent readers: Influence of genre, familiarity, and book attributes". Preschoolers and kindergarteners) were given a choice of forty books in five genres to select from each day after school. The five genres in the study included alphabet-number books, informational books, realistic fiction, traditional fantasy/folklore and modern fantasy. Classification of the books was done through a collaboration of early childhood educators and children's literature experts. Teachers recorded circulation of titles by individuals on a daily basis. Their findings demonstrated that children gravitated towards familiar titles and that this influenced new selections. This countered studies that showed emergent readers chose titles at random or without pattern (287). The study consisted of 102 children from low and middle-class family backgrounds who were preschool and kindergarten age. Over a seven week period parent surveys, teacher recordings, and classroom observations were used to assess the selection behaviors of the children. Close to 90% of the subjects selected a picture book to take home with a mean of 23.7 total titles per subject. Emergent readers appeared enthusiastic about selecting and taking home titles on a daily basis. Another finding was that while there were no significant gender differences for factors influencing picture book selection and reselection within each genre, rankings of individual titles by the total number of times a book circulated did indicate gender differences (Robinson, 1997, 301).

Priest-Ploetz (2003) is a school library media specialist who used circulation records from her own library media center to examine reading preferences of early childhood readers. Findings showed that reading preferences and reading ability were connected and classes with higher numbers of remedial readers favored Non-fiction over

Fiction. She also noted that students moved towards fiction as they grew older, and boys made that transition later. Based on these findings she made suggestions about how to improve a library collection in order to cater to the specific group of children using the library or media center (24-25). This was based solely on her own observations and what was reshelfed the most in her school media center, Priest-Ploetz found that boys checked out more nonfiction than girls, that students tended to shift to fiction as they get older, but that girls usually make the shift first, and that classes with higher numbers of remedial readers checked out more nonfiction. She believes this is because nonfiction books are designed to be somewhat more accessible to pre-reading students because the Dewey Decimal system groups similar books together. By doing this students have an easier time finding multiple books on a topic without necessarily being able to read every word- they literally just have to learn where the books on the subject they are interested in are shelved. She also believes that authentic learning (such as watching a plant grow and learning about photosynthesis) naturally leads children towards more books on that subject by creating curiosity. Nonfiction books are also more straightforward than fiction books and normally do not require readers to have certain context or knowledge of literary structures in order to comprehend the book (26). These results suggest that certain policy changes in a library's procedures can be beneficial. This could include ordering more easy reader nonfiction, removing limits on what children are allowed to check out, integrating both fiction and nonfiction into unit plans, making a greater effort to booktalk and display fiction titles in order to encourage readers, and recognizing that as educators and librarians easy books must be carefully assessed to make sure they are easy or accessible for as many readers as possible (28).

In his 2003 article on the reading interests of children, Sturm noted that the interests of children have been studied in education, psychology and library science. Much of this research explored the effect of age and gender on these habits. While age and gender do affect reading preferences and how they change as a child grows older another consideration is the choice students have in their school media center. When children have free access to materials, do they prefer the literature that already established research says they should or do they have other interests in mind? Sturm noted that children began early reading years with a high interest in animals that declined as students aged, and attributes part of that to an educational focus on animals and plants in primary and elementary grades. This can be supported by the first noted decrease in interest in animals which occurs in third grade as students move towards learning about how flora and fauna fits into the greater world (Sturm, 2003, 48). The findings of this study show that interest in science, sports and fiction increases as students move into higher grades along with interests in careers and history. The data provides another perspective on reading preferences and information when children go into their library or school media center. Sturm shows that while collections must be looked at as a whole, collections must also cater to the specific interests and needs of children, which may include taking a closer look at what goes into the sections that children and students use the most.

Moss and McDonald also examined circulation records and found them to be useful tools as a way of unobtrusively looking at children's reading preferences. The study took place in a school that strongly encouraged independent reading along with required reading. Teachers were encouraged to maintain their own classroom libraries for

students. Moss and McDonald described the physical space of the library in detail and how it utilized displays and space in order to promote certain titles, authors, and genres (Moss and McDonald, 2004, 404). Data were pulled from library records that included the school class, name of the borrower, title of the book, accession number, author name, fiction or Dewey number for non-fiction and the date borrowed. Children were expected to take out two books per library visit. This allowed access into who was using what materials and who needed materials that were more appealing to them. The number of titles borrowed by individual students varied from 4 to 25 titles and the bulk of those happened during class visits to the library. In this school, independent reading was actively encouraged as part of the language arts curriculum. Classrooms had their own stocked libraries composed of selections from the main library stock and teachers were encouraged to change out selections on a regular basis. Titles in classrooms could also be borrowed outside of school hours.

Records were analyzed using these categories- fiction, non-fiction, poetry picture-led, text-led and picture-text composite structured texts and linear, linear-dip and non-linear texts. The significance of the data were discovery of the link between school and class membership in shaping specific reading patterns. But the survey data proved to be much less useful in helping educators to understand consistently different responses to the same resources. It was found that students who borrowed fewer books were better able to recall information about the books (409). Findings also showed a connection between classroom environment and what students select in their library and this was greatly helped by detailed school library records.

Merisuo-Storm looked at older elementary school children's attitudes towards both reading and writing (2006). While it divided book preferences by gender differences, the study is useful in looking at what a collection should be made up of to inspire highest reading and circulation rates. It explored 10-11 year old girls' and boys' attitudes towards reading and writing. 145 fourth graders from a Finnish comprehensive school participated- 78 girls and 67 boys. Merisuo-Storm wished to look at attitudes towards reading and writing, find out what texts children preferred when given free selection and if they enjoyed reading different types of books or texts (Merisuo-Storm, 2006, 115). Children were asked to select a teddy bear face that best fit how they felt about a particular text and teachers explained to students how to determine what the teddy bears were feeling if children were unsure (see Appendix C).

The results showed that girls enjoyed reading far more than boys and there was an even greater divide in regards to writing in fourth grade. Nearly all the students claimed they enjoyed reading and visiting libraries but girls seemed more motivated to read and this seems to support the theory that as students go into upper grade levels, the divide between girls and boys reading habits widens. In this study girls also read a wider variety of texts while boys were far more selective. Comics topped the list of what boys preferred to read, followed by humor and adventure books. Poetry, stories and fairytales were the most unpopular of the choices given. Both sexes stated a preference for books that had sequels or were part of a series. Merisuo-Storm also found that the students greatly preferred reading to writing and when they did write wanted to correspond with someone (120). Writing stories came in second and more than eighty percent of the students said they liked or loved writing stories. So the findings in this study concluded that schools

are still struggling to close the gap between girls and boys reading and writing habits as they age.

Peterson's 2008 study found that, on average, girls checked out more books than boys across grade levels with the smallest difference in numbers falling in third grade. Peterson examined how the reading habits of elementary aged children affected their ability to succeed on the End-of-Grade tests administered by North Carolina public schools. A similar number of non-fiction books were checked out in every grade but girls checked out more fiction books than boys in every grade (Peterson, 2008, 18). But in grades every grade checked out more fiction than non-fiction books on average. The largest gap was in the fourth grade, while the smallest was in the third grade in regards to fiction versus non-fiction checkouts. Non-fiction preferences were broken down by Dewey Decimal ranges, and this showed that consistently popular books across grades and gender included Information and General Works, Science, Arts and Recreation and History and Geography while the least popular were Social Sciences and Religion. No students checked out books that fell into the Philosophy and Psychology categories (26). Thus the findings were similar to previous research undertaken. The patterns found were girls checked out more books than boys, that girls selected more fiction titles than boys, and that girls checked out more fiction titles than non-fiction titles. It also found that lower-performing male students in the third and fourth grades checked out more non-fiction titles than higher performing male students in the same grades.

Methodology

This study looked solely at what was being circulated within the school media center of a public Wake County elementary school. The school used in this study is a year-round public elementary school in Wake County, North Carolina. It is K-6 and has 704 registered students and 47 teachers. The school media center contains 20,168 copies of 16,467 titles.

Circulation records are useful tools in identifying what is being checked out of a collection and how that impacts the learning environment in a school media center. By looking at what is being checked out, librarians and educators can determine what children are interested in reading. By looking at what children are reading, decisions can be made regarding library collections in order to keep young readers interested.

Data were gathered for the months of September and October 2008. The reasons for selecting these months are as follows: the majority of students or tracks were in session, there were very few holidays, and since it was early in the year, few absences due to things such as illnesses or family trips. My intent was to get the best overview of circulation at this elementary school possible.

The variables looked at in the study were circulation numbers and the fiction or nonfiction subject headings they fell into as well as the most popular authors. During the eight-week circulation period, more than 9000 circulation records were examined from the Wake County Destiny cataloging and circulation system. These records were then combined by title in order to look at total number of circulations. Titles had to circulate

more than two times in the eight week period in order to be used for this study, as titles that circulate less suggest children do not prefer them. The subject headings used were: series fiction, series/animals fiction, animal fiction, graphic novel, humor fiction, historical fiction, fantasy and science fiction, suspense and ghost fiction, information, arts, and other which applied to very few titles that did not fit into any of the above categories.

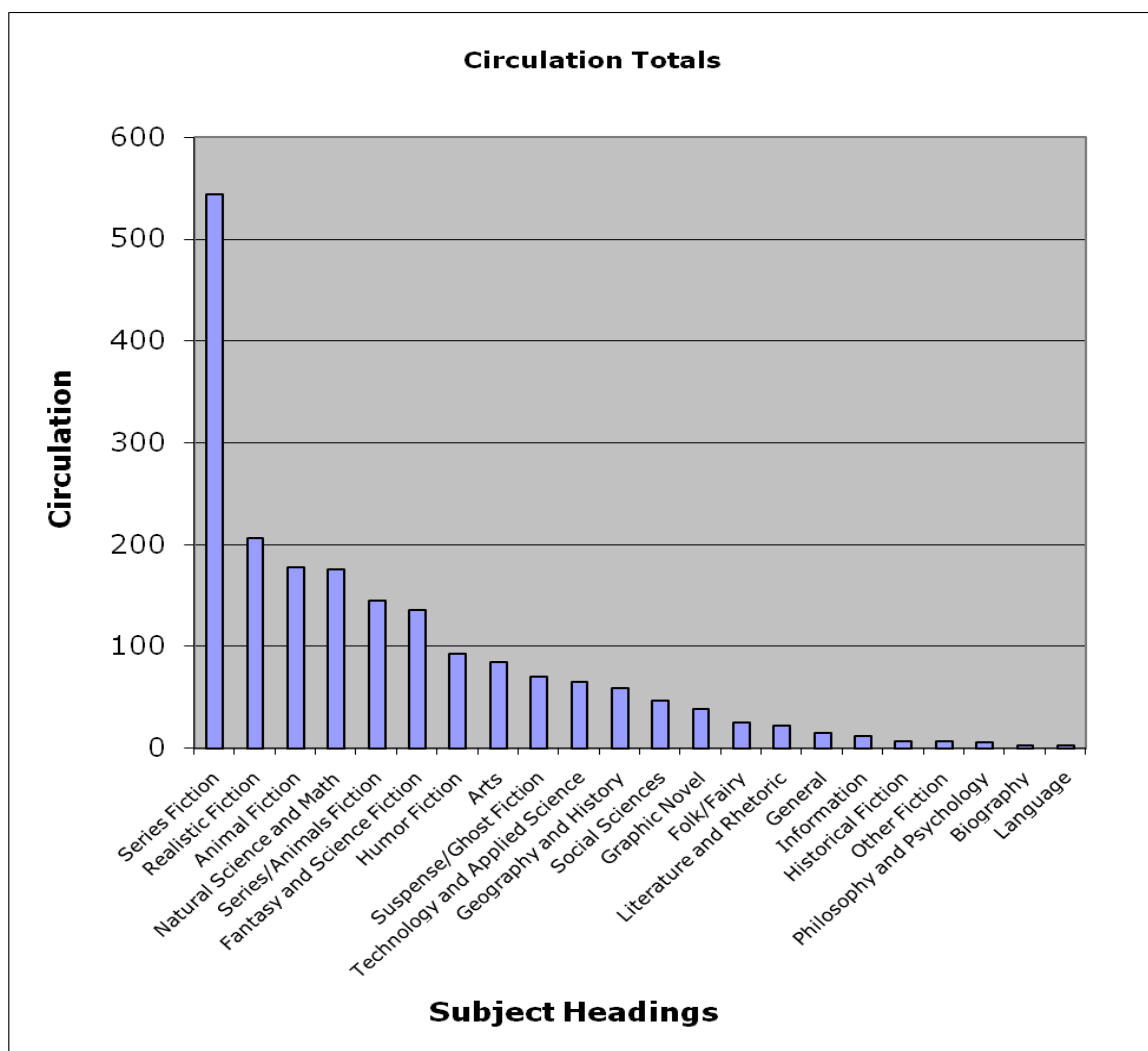
Limitations

There were several limitations in doing this study that should be noted. The first is that only books that circulated more than twice during the eight week period were included. This was in order to judge what was most popular, not just what was being circulated from the media center. Holds were numerous at this school with popular titles and authors but were not taken into consideration for the purposes of this study. Another limitation is that this study did not take into account if the same child was renewing a title. Renewals are being counted as new circulations for the purposes of this study. The circulation period is two weeks but because of the high circulation rates, many titles circulate more. Gender and grade were not separated out for the purposes of this study since the goal was to look at what children preferred to read as a whole population. It is also important to consider that older authors may circulate more than newer authors because of more copies or titles in a library. Children were not interviewed during this study, creating another limitation.

Findings

The charts below include one chart that contains data for both months combined, and a chart of the most popular fiction authors. The chart below shows the circulations and correlating subject headings for the months of September and October of 2008 at this library.

Combined Total Circulation September and October 2008

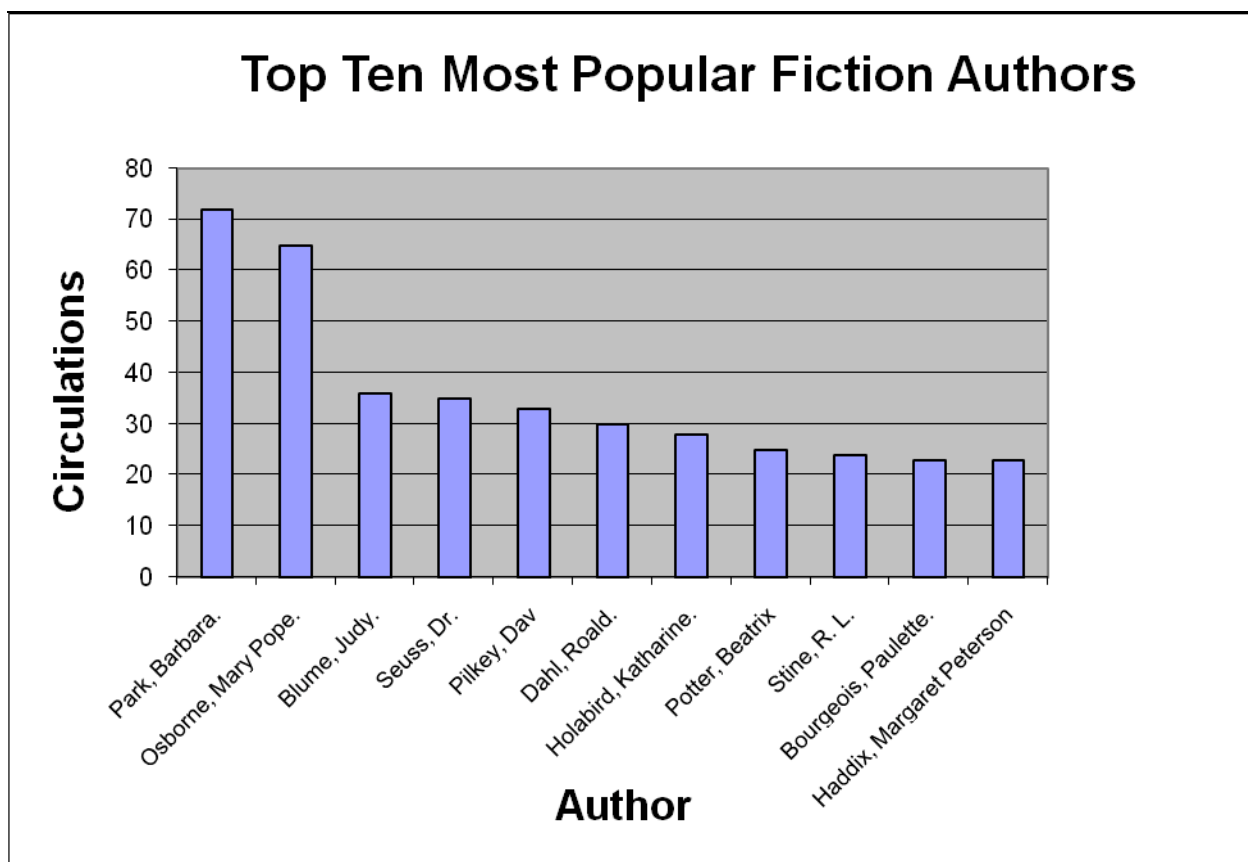


During the eight-week period there were more than nine thousand total in the school media center. The highest circulation numbers were in the Series Fiction category, with five hundred and seventy two circulations. The second highest circulations were in Realistic Fiction, with Animal Fiction following close behind Realistic Fiction.

Biography and language books were at the bottom of circulations with only one circulation each during the eight-week period. One of the most interesting findings is the non-fiction categories that have the most use. Natural Science and Math received the highest non-fiction circulation and one of the higher circulations when included with fiction. Natural science and math includes subjects such as minerals and rocks, weather and seasons, and non-fiction books about animals. Over the eight weeks examined for this study, there were more than fifty circulations of natural science and math titles. This would make sense since non-fiction animal titles are placed in the natural science and math, or Dewey Decimal 500 categories. What they are checking out of the library could be related to both free reading or individual reading or research, but either way they are taking out books about what interests them. In the case of this Wake County Elementary School, children appear to be interested in series books, realistic fiction, humor and natural science and math. Natural science and math came close to tying with realistic fiction with 178 check outs compared to 206 for realistic fiction. The lowest circulation numbers were in the categories of language, biography and philosophy and psychology for non-fiction, and historical fiction and folk and fairy tales in the fiction categories.

Circulation statistics represent what is actually being selected in a library environment for taking home or reading there. The numbers suggest what categories are popular, which categories or sections could use improvement in a school media center,

and how reading preferences can be interpreted to improve the librarian's ability to make recommendations for further reading for children or students.



Barbara Park is the author of the popular *Junie B. Jones* series, which is realistic fiction but was classified as a series title for the purposes of this study. During the eight-week circulation period, her titles circulated seventy-two times. Mary Pope Osborne was the second highest circulating author with *The Magic Tree House* series. Her sixty-five circulations suggest that children enjoy the cross between fantasy, history, and science. Series book authors dominated the list of most popular authors, correlating with subject heading popularity. Six out of the eleven authors were authors of series, showing that in this library, series books circulated most often. Margaret Peterson Haddix, author of *The*

Shadow Children series, and Paulette Bourgeois, author of *Franklin the Turtle* series were tied for tenth place. Judy Blume, best known for coming-of-age books about young women also had some of the highest circulation numbers. It is interesting that several older authors made the list- besides Judy Blume, Beatrix Potter and Dr. Seuss were also in the top ten most popular fiction authors. This shows that children are checking out classic titles as well as newer books, and that some authors have staying power. Beatrix Potter wrote most of her books at the turn of the century, but they are still popular enough at this school library to circulate as much as Mary Peterson Haddix. Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* series circulated the fifth highest number of times. The title could have been classified as either humor or series but for the purposes of this study Pilkey was classified as a series title. Roald Dahl's books have become staples in many school media centers and public libraries. Katharine Holabird is the author of *Angelina Ballerina*, another series title that made the list. The original was written in 1983, more than twenty years ago suggesting another author with staying power. R.L. Stine's *Goosebump* series has been in print since 1992, eventually separating into different series and even, more recently, a graphic novel spin-off. It is important to look at authors that children are checking out the most in order to determine what genre they prefer and therefore what titles and genres should be brought into a collection or what should be weeded out.

Discussion

The findings of this study go against some earlier studies of what children should be reading according to educators and librarians. The first aspect looked at was circulation as a whole. The average title circulated 3.88 times across the eight week period, with the highest circulation number for any single copy being 11, and the lowest 3. While the information was not divided by gender, the categories selected for circulation do fit into earlier studies by Coles and Hall (2002) that showed that boys and girls select different texts at different times.

Considering the way these findings fit into literature already published about what children prefer to read, Dowell and Garrison's 1931 study found that third graders were most interested in kindness, bravery, happiness and beauty, humor, animals, story quality, achievement, love, Bible stories, and wisdom. Comparing this to the findings of this study, children remained interested in humor, and animals. Bible stories would not have been taken into consideration since there are very few or no religious titles in school media centers.

Lauritzen and Cheves 1974 Beta Pi Lambda study of children's reading preferences showed that some of the subjects children were interested in were animals, characters, humor and content. This study supports some of their conclusions. Comparing this to the study of this Wake County, North Carolina elementary school, some of those correlate the findings of circulation over an eight week period. For instance, in the study of circulation records, children were checking out series books-

meaning they contained the same character and likely similar plot lines. This suggests that when a child becomes interested in a particular character, they will read a variety of titles about that character. Dr. Seuss was also one of the most popular authors, with books that are classified as humor. These findings are also supported by the Beta Pi Lambda study. One of the differences is that animals were the most popular category while in this study series books were by far the most popular subject heading.

Boraks, Hoffman, and Bauer's study showed that children moved towards realistic fiction and away from fantasy as their reading abilities and comprehension skills increased. In this study, fantasy continued to circulate in higher numbers within the series category. Historical fiction, poetry and nonfiction were named very few times meaning that some of the findings have remained true over the last dozen years. In this study, Mary Pope Osborne's series, *The Magic Treehouse*, is an example of popular historical fiction, but was placed in the series category. Poetry and non-fiction titles did not circulate as often as other genres, correlating with Boraks, Hoffman and Bauer's findings. Roald Dahl and R.L. Stine were two authors mentioned at each grade level in the study that were very popular in this study as well. This finding might suggest that children go into an elementary school media center with certain authors already in their reading vocabulary. Alternatively it could suggest that these are authors with staying power.

In this study, series books were the most popular circulating books by a large margin. Ashley's study (1970), which was written with the intent of giving guidelines to educators stated that series books "[are] not recommended...but ought to be recognized as a perfectly natural stage in most children's reading development" (Ashley, 1970, p. 1096). Since series books are what children are checking out in this media center, it

might be time to reconsider how series books fit into a media center collection or educational curriculum. Striking a balance between what children want to read and what an educational curriculum or outside influence is asking them to read can be two completely different objectives.

Looking at circulation records gives insight into what part a school media center plays in the education of its students, how what students are checking out can be incorporated into an educational curriculum, and if what children prefer to read is what they should be reading. Moss and McDonald felt that paying attention to school library borrowing records “[gave] insights into how reading is managed as part of school routines, and the different kinds of opportunities it creates for students”(Moss and McDonald, 2004, 411). This study demonstrated that children want to check out books that entertain them, books about characters they are interested in, and books about subjects they are interested in. The non-fiction category that had the most circulation was Natural Science and Math, which also contains animal books within the Dewey Decimal Classification System.

Circulation records from September and October of 2008 indicate that children check out and presumably enjoy reading books that are in series- and within these series, humor, fantasy, science fiction, realistic fiction and animals fiction. They also enjoy reading realistic fiction, natural science and math (non-fiction), humor, animal fiction, continuing in a slow arc downwards, towards language and biography (both non-fiction categories). In Merisuo-Storm’s article, the results showed that boys were far more selective readers, that girls were more likely to read many types of texts but that both genders enjoyed adventure stories and humorous titles. It also showed that boys were

significantly more interested in comics than girls were (Merisuo-Storm, 2006, 117). With the circulation records at this particular school, the comics or graphic novel collection is too small to judge whether or not the children were interested enough for it to make an impact on the circulation records of this study. Reasons for circulation were not recorded since the records were the only items looked at and children were not interviewed. So there is nothing but speculation about why children chose particular authors or categories over others. What does seem to be supported by the high number of series and natural science and math circulations is that authors and subjects discussed in and out of classrooms and libraries will get more circulations. Hiebert, who interviewed children about how they selected free reading material, supports this thought since comparing literature rich and literature poor classrooms in order to compare methods of teaching and selection in a library (Hiebert, 1990, 761). It would be interesting to take the study of these circulation records further and determine what inspires children to check out particular genres or authors over others.

Boraks, Hoffman, and Bauer looked at reasons children selected a book using common literary categories. Using categories to guide selection was analyzed by determining validity of using common genre and literary categories. The findings were that children move away from picture books and fantasy and towards realistic fiction as they approach grade five (Boraks et al, 1997, 319). Since the most popular titles circulating in the library are in the series category and many of those could be classified as realistic fiction, the findings are supported. Priest-Ploetz found that children would only select titles familiar to them, which is why especially young children gravitate towards series books and/or authors they are familiar with (Priest, Ploetz, 2003, 26). The

findings in this study definitely support that just from looking at circulation records. Series books being the highest circulating category support the finding that children are comfortable with familiar characters and authors. Priest-Ploetz also supports the idea that primary school students are piqued by authentic learning and likely to continue looking at books on subjects they are studying in the classroom (26).

Other studies that support the findings in this one include Harkrader and Moore (1997), and Robinson and Larsen (1997). Harkrader and Moore's findings suggest that science concepts, math, and social studies are several areas being taught using literature (Harkrader and Moore, 1997, 329). They also found that when selecting books that children will want to check out it is important to include mystery, adventure, science fiction and non-fiction categories of earth science, science experiments, and arts and hobbies. This does not completely correlate with findings based on the circulation records of this school. While circulation records do indicate a preference for earth science (which is located in the Dewey Decimal category of Natural Science and Math) mystery, adventure, and science fiction did not rank very highly in individual fiction categories but were included in series categories.

Robinson and Larsen's focus on preschoolers and kindergarteners did not fit in with this study perfectly, but there were some correlations worth noting. The selection strategies used with early readers to pick out familiar picture books translates into the high circulation numbers shown for series books in this library. The Wolfson study (1960) showed that boys and girls had different interests in five categories- adventure, physical science, machines and applied science, personal problems, and fine and applied arts. Since this study was not divided by gender, it is difficult to know the effect that

using that division would have had on data. Wolfson, Manning and Manning revisited the Wolfson study and determined that children's preferences during self-selection at their media center could be linked to librarians, teachers and other influences. There is no way of determining that during the process of this study since children were not interviewed and only circulation records were analyzed.

Conclusion

It is very important for school media specialists and librarians to look at the results of studies such as this one and take it into consideration when making collection development decisions. The circulation numbers and subject headings speak for themselves- when given the opportunity to freely select reading materials, they select materials such as series books, series books containing animals as main characters, and graphic novels. If children are interested in what is offered to them in a school media center or library, they are more likely to continue reading for pleasure and to continue utilizing their libraries, media centers, and specialists who can assist them in choosing what to read for pleasure.

Understanding the literature presented can also be beneficial in taking a look at what children are reading based on grade, gender, and minority. While this study did not address those factors, many of the studies used did and it was found to make a difference in what children preferred to read. Sturm's 2003 study showed that preferences changed as grade levels did. Sturm felt that the amount of interest expressed in fiction versus nonfiction is an issue that should be addressed consistently. For many reluctant readers, non-fiction seems easier to read and more relevant to school related activities. By using circulation records it can become easier to see not just what children are picking up to read within the media center but what they are actually selecting for check out and to take out of the media center or library.

Children's reading preferences can also help media center specialists make better decisions regarding collections that support educational curriculums, particularly when selecting materials that both boys and girls will be interested in reading. The studies examined, in particular Fisher (1988), Wolfson, Manning and Manning (1984), Haynes and Richgels,(1992) and Sturm (2003) all found that there were significant differences in what boys and girls chose to read. It is important for professionals to pay attention to circulation records in order to see what children are interested in and what children want to read. Reading preferences of children should be taken into consideration for both of these purposes and to help develop stronger readers. By understanding what children prefer to read, librarians can incorporate these preferences into school media centers and public libraries.

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Appendix A: Dewey Decimal Summary Hundreds Categories

000 Computer science, knowledge & systems	230 Christianity & Christian theology
010 Bibliographies	240 Christian practice & observance
020 Library & information sciences	250 Christian pastoral practice & religious orders
030 Encyclopedias & books of facts	260 Christian organization, social work & worship
040 [Unassigned]	270 History of Christianity
050 Magazines, journals & serials	280 Christian denominations
060 Associations, organizations & museums	290 Other religions
070 News media, journalism & publishing	300 Social sciences, sociology & anthropology
080 Quotations	310 Statistics
090 Manuscripts & rare books	320 Political science
100 Philosophy	330 Economics
110 Metaphysics	340 Law
120 Epistemology	350 Public administration & military science
130 Parapsychology & occultism	360 Social problems & social services
140 Philosophical schools of thought	370 Education
150 Psychology	380 Commerce, communications & transportation
160 Logic	390 Customs, etiquette & folklore
170 Ethics	400 Language
180 Ancient, medieval & eastern philosophy	410 Linguistics
190 Modern western philosophy	420 English & Old English languages
200 Religion	430 German & related languages
210 Philosophy & theory of religion	440 French & related languages
220 The Bible	

- 450 Italian, Romanian & related languages
- 460 Spanish & Portuguese languages
- 470 Latin & Italic languages
- 480 Classical & modern Greek languages
- 490 Other languages
- 500 Science
- 510 Mathematics
- 520 Astronomy
- 530 Physics
- 540 Chemistry
- 550 Earth sciences & geology
- 560 Fossils & prehistoric life
- 570 Life sciences; biology
- 580 Plants (Botany)
- 590 Animals (Zoology)
- 600 Technology
- 610 Medicine & health
- 620 Engineering
- 630 Agriculture
- 640 Home & family management
- 650 Management & public relations
- 660 Chemical engineering
- 670 Manufacturing
- 680 Manufacture for specific uses
- 690 Building & construction
- 700 Arts
- 710 Landscaping & area planning
- 720 Architecture
- 730 Sculpture, ceramics & metalwork
- 740 Drawing & decorative arts
- 750 Painting
- 760 Graphic arts
- 770 Photography & computer art
- 780 Music
- 790 Sports, games & entertainment
- 800 Literature, rhetoric & criticism
- 810 American literature in English
- 820 English & Old English literatures
- 830 German & related literatures
- 840 French & related literatures
- 850 Italian, Romanian & related literatures
- 860 Spanish & Portuguese literatures
- 870 Latin & Italic literatures
- 880 Classical & modern Greek literatures
- 890 Other literatures
- 900 History
- 910 Geography & travel
- 920 Biography & genealogy
- 930 History of ancient world (to ca. 499)
- 940 History of Europe
- 950 History of Asia
- 960 History of Africa
- 970 History of North America
- 980 History of South America
- 990 History of other areas

Appendix B: Four Answer Teddy Bear Graph, Merisuo-Storm

<p>If you LOVE DOING what is asked, tick this picture.</p> 	<p>If you LIKE DOING what is asked, tick this picture.</p> 
<p>If you DO NOT LIKE DOING what is asked, tick this picture.</p> 	<p>If you HATE DOING what is asked, tick this picture.</p> 

The four answer alternatives and the pictures related to them

(pictures by Rauli Storm)