

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Access to Award Winning Literature for Children with Disabilities

A Thesis Submitted to the

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With Upper Division Honors

Department Of

Allied Health & Communicative Disorders

By

Kristina Kelzer

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Student Name (print or type) Kristina Kelzer

Faculty Supervisor (print or type) Patricia Tattersall, Ph.D., CCC/SLP

Faculty Approval Signature

_____

Department of (print or type) Allied Health & Communicative Disorders

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HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT

Historically, Newbery Medal and Honor books have had high readability levels unsuitable for early elementary students and those with reading disabilities. This project calculated Newbery readability levels 2007 to the present and explored use of Caldecott Medal and Honor books from that same time period and their “picturebooks” format to determine readability levels and whether they possess qualities to facilitate foundational reading skills.

The Scholastic Book Wizard was utilized to find Lexile reading levels for all books reported on the awards’ websites. Results indicated Newbery books aim at older audiences, and Caldecott books serve a larger, more representative population within the reading and age range of elementary students.

Review of the literature confirmed the value of picturebooks to facilitate foundational reading skills. Based on the literature, a table of Caldecott Medal and Honor books (2007-2011) was created that cross-references the reading and interest levels with literacy skills. This table will assist parents and educators working with elementary students in choosing high quality, award-winning literature that will best meet the needs of their student(s).

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ABSTRACT (100-200 WORDS):

Historically, Newbery Medal and Honor books have had high readability levels unsuitable for early elementary students and those with reading disabilities. This project calculated Newbery readability levels 2007 to the present and explored use of Caldecott Medal and Honor books from that same time period and their "picturebooks" format to determine readability levels and whether they possess qualities to facilitate foundational reading skills.

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It is important for children to experience high quality, award-winning literature in order to develop their own literacy skills. For this reason, Newbery Medal and Newbery Honor books play a significant role in the elementary school curriculum. However, previous research and reading levels of these books conclude that they are beyond the abilities of young typical students, and even further out of reach for children with disabilities.

The Newbery Medal is awarded by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a branch of the American Library Association (ALA). The winner of the Newbery Medal is the “author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children,” where “children” refers to anyone age 14 or younger. The ALSC names other notable books Newbery Honor books (The John Newbery Medal, 1999).

Although the age range for “children” is quite large, it has long been noted that these books usually meet the reading age and level of a small population within the upper part of the designated range. Sometimes, the reading level even exceeds the upper level of age 14. Using the Fog Index, Fry Readability, and the Flesch Grade Level scales, Paul J. Schafer (1986) could only identify 12 Newbery books with an appropriate readability score for children in sixth grade or younger between the years of 1940 and 1986. Four of the books from 1974-1986 required at least an eighth-grade reading level.

By calculating the readability levels using the Fry readability formula, Leal and Chamberlain-Solecki (1998) found that the high readability of Newbery books had not changed. Their study showed the general grade level of Newbery books in 1998 to be 6.8. They concluded, “The award has recognized excellent literature for children ages 9 to 16.” Although the award identifies distinguished literature, the high readability makes many Newbery books

inaccessible to the students the award was created to target, especially those in lower elementary grades.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was three-fold:

1. To explore whether this trend has continued to the present time
2. To identify an alternative source, if necessary, for quality literature for young elementary school students and individuals with disabilities that negatively impact their reading ability
3. To provide a resource for educators/parents that readily identifies specific books for specific reading levels/interests/skills

Using Scholastic's *Teacher Book Wizard* (Leveled Search, n.d.), the readability measures of current Newbery Medal and Honor books (2007-2011) were calculated according to the Lexile measure. The Lexile measure is an equal-interval readability scale that is independent of grade level. It typically ranges from 200L-1700L, although scores can be higher or lower. Scholastic labels scores below 100L as Beginning Reader (BR). Because Lexile measures are based on semantic and syntactic complexity, Lexile measures cannot be obtained for poetry or plays (Lexiles, 2008).

The trend of high readability appears to continue for the Newbery books from 2007-2011. Reading levels ranged from 610L to 1010L; the approximate grade range represented was 3rd to 8th grade (Lexiles, 2008). While Newbery books are high quality, award-winning literature that help facilitate literacy skills in children, the typical elementary student, especially a student below 3rd grade, is unable to read them. Students with reading disabilities are at an even greater disadvantage. An alternative source is needed to facilitate growth in literacy skills.

This study next explored the use of Caldecott books as this alternative. The ALSC awards the Caldecott Medal to the artist of “the most distinguished picturebook of the year” and names other notable picturebooks Caldecott Honor books (The Randolph Caldecott Medal, 1999). The Lexile measures of recent Caldecott Medal and Honor books (2007-2011) were identified using the Scholastic *Teacher Book Wizard* (Leveled Search, n.d.). Results ranged from <100L to 1100L with the grade range represented being kindergarten through 8th grade (Lexiles, 2008). Compared to Newbery books, Caldecott books represent a wider Lexile and grade range. They also include more elementary grades than Newbery books, which represent older grades only.

Review of the literature revealed that picturebooks offer more to elementary students than just a wide range of readability. The term “picturebooks” refers to a format of book where “meaning is generated simultaneously from written text, visual images, and the overall design” (Evans, 2009). Pictures and text are woven together in such a way that both are necessary to convey content. This format promotes foundational reading skills for both typical elementary students and students with reading disabilities.

Picturebooks are able to teach young children the basic concepts of reading at an early age. They increase picture knowledge by teaching children to look for the story meaning in the book’s images. Children increase print knowledge when they learn that meaning is contained in the words on the page and learn the rules of print. Page knowledge increases when children learn page position and order, and book knowledge increases when children learn the way books are organized to tell a story (Ruddell, 2006).

The blend of pictures and text also increases a child’s meaning-making abilities, enriches learning experiences, and develops comprehension. Picturebooks increase language and

conceptual knowledge by helping the reader interpret words and extend their meaning with the use of pictures. This allows children to move from a literal understanding to an insightful understanding and to create personal meaning and connections. They can develop an understanding of characters, settings, events, and themes which is critical to being a successful reader. The wide variety of picturebooks available allows readers to select books within their own developmental and cultural context. The unique relationship between text and pictures in picturebooks fosters “analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing-the highest level of comprehension or higher-order thinking” (Johnson, 2009).

Additionally, picturebooks develop visual literacy, which is increasingly important in today’s culture. They teach aspects of narrative and permit access to narratives and the ideas represented in them to all readers. Picturebooks use images to expose early readers to similes and metaphors and teach interpretation skills that students can apply to written text. Almost all students are able to access picturebooks because they focus on the use of both visual and verbal skills, so they meet the needs of both experienced and inexperienced learners (Arzipe & Styles, 2003).

The information gathered from the *Scholastic Teacher Book Wizard* and during the review of the literature regarding readability and interest level of the Caldecott Medal and Honor books and the literacy skills each one promotes was compiled into a table (Appendix A). It is the hope of the researcher that this table will provide educators and parents with a readily available resource for selecting books for children performing at various reading levels, with diverse interests and literacy needs.

As the Newbery book continues to target more advanced readers, Caldecott Medal and Honor picturebooks appear to be a viable alternative to Newbery Medal and Honor books. The

Lexile measures of Caldecott award-winning picturebooks show that the reading level spans a much wider range of ages when compared to Newbery books.

These results, as presented at the Illinois Speech-Language Hearing Association Conference in February 2012 (Appendix B) indicate that Caldecott books provide quality literature to facilitate foundational reading skills which are accessible for both typical elementary students and students with reading disabilities. Review of the literature revealed that embedded within the illustrated pages of picturebooks are the literary concepts that are critical for students to develop as they mature into more advanced readers. Due to the importance of the illustrations to the meaning making process, picturebooks offer access through both visual and verbal modalities engaging younger typical students as well as students with disabilities.

Educators, parents, and students should regard picturebooks as high quality literature and utilize the attached table to select appropriate text for specific elementary students. As an appropriate alternative to Newbery Medal and Honor books, Caldecott Medal and Honor books provide all students, especially those with reading disabilities, a way to read award-winning literature at an appropriate age and reading level.

APPENDIX A

Readability and Foundational Literacy Skills in Caldecott Medal and Honor Books 2007-2011

Research indicates that all picturebooks:

- Increase picture, print, page, and book knowledge¹
- Develop characterization, setting, and plot¹
- Increase meaning-making abilities²
- Enrich learning experiences²
- Develop comprehension²
- Increase language and concept knowledge²
- Help reader interpret and extend word meanings²
- Allow reader to move from literal to insightful understanding²
- Develop understanding of characters, setting, events, and themes²
- Develop visual literacy³
- Develop literacy competence³
- Teach interpretation skills that can be applied to written text³

¹Ruddell, 2006; ²Johnson, 2009; ³Arzipe & Styles, 2003

	Readability	Interest Age	Pictures Only	Genre			Predictability	Phonemic Awareness/Rhyme	Logical Flow (Intro → Problem → Consequences → Resolution)	Retell				Figurative Language	Summarizing	Connections		
				** Poetry	Expository	Narrative				Single Character	Multiple Characters	Single Event	Multiple Events			Text to Self	Text to Text	Text to World
Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom	660L AD	Grade 3					X		X	X			X				X	
Gone Wild: An Endangered Animal Alphabet	NA	PreK			X											X	X	
*Flotsam	NA	K	X			X	X		X	X	X		X				X	
Knuffle Bunny Too: A Case of Mistaken Identity	690L AD	K			X	X			X		X		X	X	X			
The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain	760L AD	Grade 3			X					X							X	
First the Egg	NA	Grade PreK				X											X	
Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad	380L AD	Grade 3			X	X			X		X		X		X	X	X	
*The Invention of Hugo Cabret	820L	Grade 4			X	X			X		X		X		X	X	X	
A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams	820L AD	Grade 3		X		X			X	X			X			X	X	
How I Learned Geography	660L AD	Grade K			X				X		X	X	X				X	
A Couple of Boys Have the Best Week Ever	680L	K-Grade 2			X	X			X		X		X	X	X			
*The House in the Night	NA	Grade PreK									X							
Red Sings from Treetops: A Year in Colors	NA	Grade K		X							X		X		X		X	
All the World	NA	Grade 1		X		X		X			X		X		X		X	
*The Lion & the Mouse	NA	Grade PreK	X						X		X		X		X			
Interrupting Chicken	300L	Grade K			X	X			X		X		X	X	X	X		
Dave the Potter: Artist, Poet, Slave	1100	Grade K		X		X				X		X	X				X	
*A Sick Day for Amos McGee	760L	Grade K			X	X			X		X		X	X	X			

APPENDIX B

Access to Award Winning Literature for Children with Disabilities

Kristina Kelzer

Faculty Mentor: Patricia Tattersall, Ph.D., CCC/SLP

School of Allied Health & Communicative Disorders, College of Health & Human Sciences, Northern Illinois University



Introduction

- It is important for children to experience high-quality, award-winning literature.
- Newbery Award and Honor books are a large part of elementary school curriculum.
- However, previous calculations of the reading levels of Newbery Medal and Honor books have concluded that they are beyond the abilities of typical elementary students, and even further out of reach for children with disabilities.

Background

The Newbery Medal

- Recognizes the author of "the most distinguished American children's book" each year
- "Children" refers to age 14 and younger
- Awarded by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a branch of the American Library Association (ALA)
- The first medal was awarded in 1922
- Other notable books are named Newbery Honor Books (The John Newbery Medal, 1999)

The Caldecott Medal

- Awarded by the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), a branch of the American Library Association (ALA), to the artist of "the most distinguished picture book of the year"
- The first medal was awarded in 1938
- Other notable picture books are named Caldecott Honor Books (The Randolph Caldecott Medal, 1999)

Previous Newbery Readability Research

- Between 1940 and 1986, 12 Newbery books had appropriate readability scores for children 6th grade and younger (Schafer, 1986)
- 4 books from 1974 to 1986 required at least an 8th grade reading level (Schafer, 1986)
- In 1998 the general grade level of Newbery books was 6.8 (Leal & Chamberlain-Solecki, 1998)
- In 1998 the typical age group represented by the award was 9-16 (Leal & Chamberlain-Solecki, 1998)

Research Questions

- Are Caldecott Award and Honor picturebooks an alternative to Newbery Award books?
- Can picturebooks provide quality literature to facilitate foundational reading skills that are accessible for both typical elementary students and students with reading disabilities?
- Do Caldecott books have a lower readability level than Newbery Books?

Methods

- Research was collected about the format of picturebooks and their merit as quality literature using the journals and databases of Northern Illinois University Library and other textbooks
- A list of Newbery Award and Honor, and Caldecott Award and Honor books for the past five years was compiled using the American Library Association's website (www.ala.org)
- The reading level for each book was calculated according to the Lexile® measure by using the *Teacher Book Wizard* database on Scholastic's website (Levelled Search, n.d.)

Lexile Measures

- Equal-interval readability scale
- Based on semantic and syntactic complexity
- Typically ranges from 200L-1700L
- Independent of grade level
- Individual Lexile measures indicate the level of 75% comprehension
- Lexile measures can not be obtained for poetry/plays
- Scores below 100L are labeled Beginning Reader (BR) (Lexiles, 2008)

Results

Picturebooks

Pictures and text are woven together in such a way that both are necessary to convey content. Research indicates these books:

- Increase picture, print, page, and book knowledge
- Develop characterization, setting, and plot (Ruddell, 2006)
- Create understanding of words children are unable to read in isolation (Marra, 1990)
- Increase meaning-making abilities
- Enrich learning experiences
- Develop comprehension
- Increase language and concept knowledge
- Allow the opportunity to select books within developmental and cultural context of student
- Help reader interpret words and extend their meaning with use of pictures
- Create a relationship between text and pictures that fosters "analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing—the highest level of comprehension or higher-order thinking"
- Help children move from literal understanding to insightful understanding
- Allow reader to create personal meaning and connections
- Develop understanding of characters, setting, events, and themes (Johnson, 2009)

Picturebooks

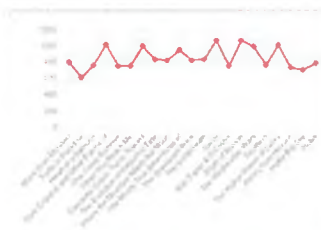
- Develop visual literacy
- Use images to convey emotion, theme, character, settings, and story to develop literary competence
- Teach aspects of narrative
- Use images to expose early readers to simile and metaphor
- Permit access to narratives and the ideas represented in them to all readers
- Require the use of visual and verbal skills, which most children are able to use
- Meet the needs of both experienced and inexperienced learners
- Teach interpretation skills that can be applied to written text (Arzipe & Styles, 2003)

Readability

- In the past five years, Newbery Medal and Honor Books ranged from 610L to 1010L
- The approximate grade range represented is 3rd to 8th grade (Lexiles, 2008)
- In the past five years, Caldecott Medal and Honor books ranged from <100L to 1100L
- The approximate grade range represented is kindergarten to 8th grade (Lexiles, 2008)



Lexile measures for Caldecott Medal and Honor Books above the level of Beginning Reader for the past five years, excluding poetry/plays



Lexile measures for Newbery Medal and Honor books in the past five years, excluding poetry/plays

Conclusions

- Caldecott Medal and Honor Books represent a wider Lexile and grade range
- The readability of Caldecott Medal and Honor books includes more elementary grades than Newbery Medal and Honor books, which represent older grades only
- Picturebooks, as a group, promote foundational reading skills
- Use of Caldecott Medal and Honor picturebooks allow more students access to quality literature for literacy skill development

Future Direction

An original list of high-quality Caldecott picturebooks that cross-references reading levels and interest levels will be created as a resource for parents and educators working with elementary students—especially those with reading and language-learning disabilities

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