

# LEADERSHIP LETTERS

Issues and Trends in Reading

## Reading Preferences and Self-Selected Reading

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Most adults who are readers remember at least one book from childhood that was a particular favorite. It is interesting that many of those book memories go back to elementary school, especially to the ages between seven and ten (Imdieke, 1989). This underscores the importance of helping students find books that will captivate them and help create a love for reading. A remembered book or reading experience implies a strong feeling about that book and active involvement with the story or content. Children and young adults, who are able to read, but choose not to, risk becoming adults who do not read. Our challenge is to learn about students' interests and to make available the kinds of books they will choose to read on their own so that they do not become aliterate.

### How do we learn what books interest young readers?

The quest to learn what young readers like begins, first, with identifying student interests and, second, noting how they translate into preferences for books. The third part involves learning which books students will like well enough to finish reading.

For many decades, literacy experts have used a variety of strategies to learn about reading preferences. These include questionnaires, checklists of book titles (real and fictitious), interviews, library withdrawal records, and



students' logs that report independent reading (Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding, 1988). It is difficult to get a true picture of reading preferences, however, because the choices students make are necessarily limited by the options presented on a questionnaire or the books available. Library behavior and reading circulation records give interesting information, but we must recognize that even though they indicate books that students think they would be interested in reading, they do not tell whether the students actually read them.

Fortunately, we have other sources that identify books children have read or heard and have voted as their favorites from among many choices. These sources include state book awards voted on by children and lists such as the Children's Choices List from the International Reading Association (IRA).

The most authentic strategies may be observational, studies that focus on student behavior in a classroom or library. One study of library behavior indicated that the most sophisticated students scanned or read parts of books as they made a decision about what to select. These students seemed to choose or reject a book based on personal preference, on an emotional response to the book, or on the physical characteristics of the book (Reutzel and Gali, 1997).

Reader response may also give useful information about what students like to read. Formal and informal book discussions and reading response journals can give an in-depth picture of what is going on when students read books. The responses frequently include comments about character behavior that the student admires or does not like, or about aspects of the plot that are gripping. When response journals and discussions reveal such information, we learn about the essence of the book itself and why it appeals. This is richer information than a listing of the topics that a student thinks are interesting and might want to read about. So it would seem that teachers, librarians, and parents need to begin with a search for topics and themes that appeal and then follow up with discussions and other means of finding out which books were genuinely enjoyed and what qualities of the books influenced students to keep on reading to the end.

### **Why do readers choose some books over others?**

There is some evidence that children in grades three and four most often read books that fit their recreational interests (McGinley and Kamberelis, 1996). Intermediate grade students who participated in the Children's

Choices project chose *Home Run: The Story of Babe Ruth* by Robert Burleigh, ill. by Mike Wimmer (1998) and *NBA Action from A to Z* by James Preller (1997) as favorites. In contrast, students in grades six through eight seem to read more often for utilitarian reasons and less frequently for individual development or enjoyment (Ley, et al., 1994). Of course, these studies may reflect differences in school demands more than individual free choice of reading material, yet they do provide a way to interpret the choices students make in selecting books to read.

### **A Growing Preference for Nonfiction**

Recent studies show some new trends in reading preferences that help to refine our knowledge about book selection. For example, within the past two decades, reader preference for nonfiction (informational books) has increased. Until recently, informational books were rarely listed among preferred categories. However, several studies underscore an emerging interest. Primary grade children have indicated interest in reading general information material, including books on history and science (Carter, 1976; Huus, 1979; Itzkowitz, 1982; Kirsch, 1975). Younger readers in the Children's Choice's project have selected many books of nonfiction, including *Look to the North: A Wolf Pup Diary* by Jean Craighead George (1997) and *The Butterfly Alphabet* by Kjell B. Sandved (1996). Children in grades three and four continue to be interested in animals and nature, while, at the same time, they are developing a greater liking for adventure and realistic stories (Graham, 1986). By fourth grade, reading interests of boys and girls begin to diverge; boys show stronger preferences for nonfiction and girls show stronger preferences for realistic fiction (Landy, 1977; Lynch-Brown, 1977; Wolfson, Manning, and Manning, 1984). Several studies suggest that intermediate grade students are interested in history and science, and that they also enjoy mystery, adventure, and biographies (Bundy, 1983; Graham, 1986; Hawkins, 1983; McGinley and Kamberelis, 1996).

According to Children's Choices, students in this age group select such varied books as *Safari* by Robert Bateman and Rick Archbold (1998), *Tornado* by Betsy Byars (1996), *Rattlesnake Dance: True Tales, Mysteries, and Rattlesnake Ceremonies* by Jennifer Owings Dewey (1997), and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J. K. Rowling (1998). One reason for the increased interest in nonfiction may be due to the fact that during the last few decades students have had access to more informational books than ever before. Sixth-grade students also select scary stories, story collections, cartoons, comics, popular magazines, and sports, even though many of these books are not widely available in school or classroom libraries (Worthy, 1999).

### **Humor and Happy Endings**

Literary devices, particularly humor, may influence reading preferences. A study of books selected by children and appearing on the IRA Children's Choices List (Greenlaw and Wielan, 1979) reinforces the cross-age appeal of humorous books. Favorite funny titles include *Tops and Bottoms* by Janet Stevens (Harcourt, 1995), *Math Curse* by Jon Scieszka, illustrated by Lane Smith (1995), and *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* by Kevin Henkes (1996). Studies of poetry preferences also show appreciation for rhythm, rhyme, and humor (Fisher and Natarella, 1982; Terry, 1974; Ingham, 1980; Cullingford, 1979). In fact, a study of poetry indicated that elementary school students often chose books by Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, and Judith Viorst (Kutiper and Wilson, 1993), a finding that comes as no surprise to teachers and librarians.

Other literary devices that appeal are happy endings (Mendoza, 1983), episodic plots (Abrahamson, 1979; Abrahamson and Shannon, 1983), and the development of complex characters (Abrahamson and Shannon, 1983). Adolescents pay particular attention to the age and sex of characters in the books they choose, and they prefer characters they see as similar to themselves (Carter and Harris, 1982; Ingham, 1982; Johnson, Peer and Baldwin, 1984; Yoder, 1978). Readers seem to find it more

suspenseful when they can identify more closely with characters (Jose and Brewer, 1984). This seems evident in Children's Choices selections such as *Achingly Alice* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (1998), *See You Around, Sam!* by Lois Lowry (1996), and *10 Minutes till Bedtime* by Peggy Rathmann (1998).

External factors may also influence preferences and book selection. From middle grades into adolescence, students tend to select books according to favorite authors. These readers also take into account book appearance, including the cover and the illustrations, content of the first page, the length, and the title (Burgess, 1985; Higgins and Elliott, 1982; Wendelin and Zinck, 1983). For lower achieving students, factors such as print, illustrations, book length, and title seem to be especially important (Wilson, 1985; Higgins and Elliott, 1982; White, 1973).

All of these pieces of information can be useful aides to identifying student preferences and to making available the kinds of books they may choose to read. There is also the question of whether it is possible to teach students to be more effective in selecting books that match their interests and even to expand those reading interests. Pappas (1993) worked with kindergartners by pairing fiction and informational books and reading each pair aloud to elicit their preferences. After reading a pair of books, she responded to questions and helped them to "pretend read" each book. The children in her study showed a preference for information books over fiction, a finding in contrast to earlier research that indicated young children liked fiction best. It is possible that talking about and rereading the selections may have influenced book selection for these young children.

This brief look at reading preferences and books children name as favorites describes some ways to help students actively engage their interests and reading preferences as they experiment with book selection. If we are successful, every child will find at least one well-loved book that is read and reread until it remains a favorite into adulthood.

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