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Journal of Literacy Research 2006 38: 81
DOI: 10.1207/s15548430jlr3801_4

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What is This?
Children’s Choices for Recreational Reading: A Three-Part Investigation of Selection Preferences, Rationales, and Processes

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This report delineates a three-part investigation into first graders’ preferences, selection rationales, and processes when choosing a picture book to own. One-hundred ninety first graders were invited to select their favorite book from among nine high-quality, well-illustrated picture books representing a variety of topics, media, and genres. In addition, 122 students were also interviewed about their selections and how they made their choices. An overwhelming majority of first graders preferred informational books, especially animal books. The finding contradicts much previous research indicating that young readers, particularly girls, favor narrative text. The selection rationales of these students focused on topic or perceived content but were not particularly sophisticated. The selection processes data indicate gender differences, especially related to social aspects of recreational reading and perceived reading ability. The study extends the ongoing professional dialogue related to text preferences for independent, recreational reading and challenges educators to better understand how even very young readers may develop as readers in the postmodern information age.

Examining children’s choices of texts for recreational reading is not a new topic. For decades, educators have investigated students’ selection of leisure reading materials (Burgess, 1985; Lawson, 1972; Reutzel & Gali, 1998). Indeed, Weintraub (1977) cites the assessment of children’s reading interests as one of the few trends documented throughout this century. Although the foci have varied, the premise is well
established. The more students read independently, the better their reading becomes. When students read books of their own choosing, they are likely to be more motivated, independent readers. The ultimate goal is to encourage motivated, skilled readers who choose to read widely and who develop lifelong reading habits.

The field of children’s book reading behaviors is a complex arena. Key research topics related to self-selected reading include analysis of text features, genre awareness and preferences, selection processes, gender differences, developmental aspects, ability issues, and motivational factors. This study sought to explore first graders’ preferences among various picture books and to update our understanding of their selection processes. It was designed to challenge previous notions about why and how contemporary and diverse young readers choose their books.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Text Features

Much earlier text-selection research analyzed students’ awareness and use of text features in their book choices (Greenlaw & Wielan, 1979; Lawson, 1972; Peterson, 1971; Stewig, 1972). The physical characteristics of books—including the title, cover page, illustrations, length, and size—influence readers, serving to attract or dissuade them. Not so long ago, most books were drab in their appearance, and the use of illustration was quite limited; students were forced to select books largely on content or recommendation. As full-page color illustrations became more affordable, educators became even more interested in the role of high-quality picture books and their effect on classroom instruction and readers. Recently, children’s picture books have become even more dramatic because of technological advancements in printing processes. Thus, front covers and illustrations are now critical components in text development. Fonts are easy to vary, text is placed in multiple configurations on the page, and illustrations exemplify a larger variety of media, including three-dimensional possibilities (Goldstone, 1999). The explosion in the children’s book industry warrants renewed interest in students’ understanding and preferences for texts of varying physical features (Goldstone, 2001–2002; Serafini, 2005).

Genre Preferences

In many studies over the years and in various countries, different readers have evidenced preferences for particular genres. Research has shown that younger readers prefer stories, especially folk tales and fantasy (Hall & Cole, 1999; Moss & McDonald, 2004), with genre preference broadening through the intermediate grades.
These patterns reflect what teachers have typically promoted in elementary classrooms. There is research indicating that beyond adolescence, however, students’ genre preferences for recreational reading again narrow along gender lines.

Researchers have recently recommended providing sufficient exposure to a variety of texts to help learners develop and apply varied literacy skills and strategies that will transfer to real-world reading (Caswell & Duke, 1998; Duke & Kays, 1998; Pappas, 1993; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). There is now an increased emphasis on the use of expository texts in earlier grades (Duke, 2000). School reading and literacy assessments have become increasingly demanding in this information age, and much of the focus is on informational reading across subjects. Even very young students are exposed to and expected to comprehend complex, informational text and postmodern fiction (Goldstone, 2001–2002). Teachers can no longer privilege narratives at the expense of expository formats in their classrooms, even if storybooks dominate basal readers and classroom anthologies. Given more exposure to informational texts, young readers may develop a preference for this genre.

Selection Strategies

Much research in the late 1980s and 1990s highlighted that self-selection enhances recreational reading behaviors (Carter, 1988; Fleener, Morrison, Linek, & Rasinski, 1997; Jenkins, 1955; Timion, 1992; Wendelin & Zinck, 1988). Family and friends were found to play key roles in recommending books. In addition, students relied on familiar authors and book series for their independent reading (Hiebert, Mervar, & Person, 1990; Isaacs, 1992). When perusing individual books, students often report looking at a book’s title and front cover, determining its content, flipping through the pages, and reading parts of the book or the book blurbs.

However, even when exposed to a wide variety of books, many students evidence a limited repertoire of selection strategies (Au, Kunitake, & Blake, 1992; Hiebert et al., 1990). Thus, a greater focus has been placed on helping students develop more sophisticated selection strategies. This task enjoins teachers, who had previously not factored predominantly in the process (Greaney, 1999; Rasinski, Mohr, & Linek, 1994), to teach students strategies for finding books that they would find interesting and be successful reading (Ohlhausen & Jepsen, 1992; Wendelin & Zinck, 1988). Successful reading now encompasses interest, access, accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. This multifaceted definition presents a more complex challenge—helping students find books that engage them and allow them to apply efficient reading behaviors.

Gender Differences

Gender stereotypes have repeatedly surfaced in the literature regarding children’s book preferences (Chick & Heilman-Houser, 2000; Childress, 1985; Kropp &
Halverson, 1983). In general, girls have been shown to read more than boys, perform better on reading tests than boys, and prefer stories with female protagonists, with boys preferring to read about male characters. Girls have shown more interest in stories, especially when highlighting family, friendships, and home life. Boys have often been shown to prefer nonfiction, particularly sports, science, and history information (Barrs & Pidgeon, 1994). The topic of animals has been associated with both girls’ and boys’ preferences (Anderson, 2002). Several studies have shown that boys seem more bound by gender than do girls—especially in public settings (Childress, 1985; Collins-Standley, Gan, & Yu, 1996; Dutro, 2001–2002; Schultheis, 1990). Most experts argue that any perceived gender difference is probably not inherited but more culturally influenced (Langerman, 1990; Simpson, 1996). If so, as cultural norms change, assessing boys’ and girls’ independent reading behaviors is of renewed interest, especially with picture books that have historically promoted gender stereotyping (Timm, 1988; White, 1986).

Developmental Aspects

Age and ability issues related to reading habits have likewise experienced a resurgence in research. Earlier studies indicated that book preferences seemed to emerge around age 9 and peak shortly thereafter, once students had learned to read and had more exposure to various kinds of literature (Haynes, 1988; Wendelin & Zinck, 1988). More recently, however, teachers expect even the youngest readers to practice independent reading and to self-select their texts. In general, as children mature, so do their reading interests, so that with age, genre preferences increase from a focus on fantasy fiction to more realistic and diverse perspectives of the world (Purves & Beach, 1972). Few studies on students’ preferences have followed students through the grades to determine the same subjects’ preference patterns. Feeley (1982) studied fourth and fifth graders’ text preferences and then sampled the same school population 10 years later. Her findings revealed that the boys remained rather static in their preferences. The boys retained a primary interest in sports books, followed by books about informational topics, everyday people problems, and the arts, in that order. The girls, however, showed more fluctuation in their interests, with interest in sports developing as the girls became older. This developmental change may be an example of a socially influenced process, because the time frame corresponded with the introduction of Title IX and the increased attention to athletic activities for girls in the United States. Obviously, developmental aspects of book preferences overlap with those of gender. Other examples of socially influenced reading behaviors might include the preponderance of nonfiction books promoting science careers and targeted to boys and recently published multicultural literature that targets minority populations. The latter is less based on gender, but perhaps just as developmental (Wigfield & Asher, 1984).
Ability Issues

Although some children’s high interest and motivation enable them to handle more difficult texts, there has been a heavy emphasis in recent years on matching children with books at their independent reading levels (Allington, 2001; Clay, 1993; Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Therefore, researchers have investigated students’ abilities and their tendencies to pick books that equal their developing reading skills (Fresch, 1995; Kragler, 2000; Lehman, 1991; Lysaker, 1997; Swanton, 1984). More proficient readers are also more skilled in their selection processes and more likely to find books they can successfully read, as compared to struggling readers (Kragler, 2000). Some software products claim to be able to quickly identify any student’s current ability and recommend appropriate books that ensure successful individual assessment, in particular, and reading progress, in general (Advantage Learning Systems, 1993). Certainly, less skilled readers and the less skilled selectors need successful access, selection, and reading experiences.

Motivational Factors

Intuitively, successful readers are likely to be more motivated to read, and this extra reading practice fuels their reading progress. When students struggle to read, they are discouraged and tend to avoid reading as a leisure activity. Thus, literacy research has sought ways to help less proficient readers be more motivated to read on their own. Most educators are well aware of motivational reading programs, and again, the use of technology has allowed groups to package computer-based systems to help manage students’ independent reading. Unfortunately, such programs can actually serve to limit students’ choices and may well work to undermine reading motivation because of the extrinsic nature of the rewards (Biggers, 2001; Gambrell & Marinak, 1997; Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). Interest, access, and control are key aspects of intrinsically motivated readers; high interest can offset text difficulty in that motivated readers may persist in reading a text that is beyond their reading level (Kincade, 1991).

One way that interest and access relate to reading motivation is the social influence of teachers, peers, and family members, particularly mothers. The example and recommendations of others can motivate students to select and read books that they would not otherwise encounter (Wendelin & Zinck, 1988). Although teachers have many opportunities to share books, research identifies peers and family members as more influential in students’ text selections.

A more intrinsically motivating aspect of leisure reading is finding a book that the reader can relate to in substantive ways. With the advent of more multicultural children’s literature, one would expect investigations of how students respond to and select books representing their cultural diversity. However, such research is still quite limited (Laumbach, 1995). Intuitively, we might expect readers to seek
books that mirror their lives and social surroundings (Sims Bishop, 1990; Stoodt-Hill & Amspaugh-Corson, 2001). Although multicultural books are often recommended (Hopson & Hopson, 1993; Katz, 1983; Radencich, 1985; Ramsey, 1987; Rudman, 1984), few studies have directly addressed them as part of children’s recreational reading diets.

This study was designed to revisit the topic of self-selected reading materials as warranting updated attention. Specifically, I sought to determine whether young readers preferred books that mirrored them in socially oriented ways or if other attributes predominated—a topic not well addressed in the research literature. This study focused on picture books and early readers’ independent reading behaviors, which have also received less scrutiny. The three-part study investigated preferences, selection processes, and the students’ rationales for their choices. The use of student interviews enabled the researcher to explore the aspects of genre preferences, gender differences, text difficulty, and motivation as they related to the children’s choices and their selection processes.

The research questions for this study were:

1. Given a wide variety of high-quality picture books, which book would first graders select to keep as their own?
2. Given a wide variety of books from which to choose one, would first graders evidence a preference for particular genres?
3. Would first graders show a preference for a book that mirrored them in gender, first language, or racial identity?
4. Are gender differences evident in the book choices, the selection rationales, and selection processes among first graders?
5. How do first graders explain their specific book selection rationales?
6. How do first graders explain their generalized book selection processes?

**METHOD**

**Selected Texts**

To begin the project, I established criteria for selecting books to offer primary-aged students: high-quality picture books with full-color illustrations; representative of various genres, genders, ethnicities, and language (English and Spanish); appropriate for first graders in content; recently published and thus not likely to be well-known among students; and similarly priced. I consulted with a regional Teachers’ Choices coordinator, an experienced children’s librarian, and a local children’s bookstore owner for recommendations and then, based on their suggestions, reviewed dozens of recently published children’s books.
Subsequently, I selected nine recently published, hardback picture books for their appeal to first graders because of their content and illustrations and because they represented various literary genres and multicultural children’s literature. The books were similarly priced, with an average cost of $16. The professionals mentioned previously endorsed their inclusion in the study. Five of the selected texts were classified as fiction, including both realistic and fanciful narratives with male and female protagonists, representing Anglos, Asians, African Americans, and Latinos. The other four books were nonfiction: an informational text featuring photographs and short descriptions of dangerous animals, a partial biography of Abraham Lincoln’s early life, a comical description of mothers illustrated with dinosaur characters, and an alphabet book of poems about possible classroom pets. The various titles afforded a variety of themes and topics often popular with young children, including family relationships, school activities, animals, and magic. To summarize, the texts were representative of the following attributes: gender (male and female characters), genre, ethnicity (Anglo, Asian, African American, and Latino), and theme (family, school, nature, history, and fantasy). Two hardback copies of each book were purchased for demonstration purposes. The books selected are presented in Table 1.

### Student Subjects

To determine the book preferences and selection processes of primary students, this study targeted a small, rural-becoming-urban school district in the southwest...
United States. Permission to conduct the study was received from the school principal and the district superintendent. Letters of explanation were distributed to all the first-grade teachers. The school district serves a diverse population of students representing various ethnicities, languages, and socioeconomic levels. The study was done near the end of the school year, which allowed the students involved nearly 2 full years of classroom instruction and the associated exposure to picture books in instructional settings.

There were 10 first-grade classrooms at the primary school, with approximately 19 students in each class and a mean student age of 7.7 years. All students were asked to participate in the study. There were 104 (55%) boys and 86 (45%) girls. Of the total, 30% ($n = 56$) of the students were Latino, half of whom were classified as Limited English Proficient. For these students (15% of the total), the instructions and interview protocol items were presented in English and Spanish, when necessary. The gender percentages were the same among the Latino subgroup.

Procedures

Selection protocol. With the help of the school principal and the classroom teachers, children had 90 minutes to peruse the books displayed outside their classrooms. I displayed the books on a table in a random order, and individual students were invited into the hallway to inspect the books and make their selections. I recorded their choices but did not distribute any books.

All 190 first graders selected a book from the nine titles. I encouraged students to look at all the books presented and to decide which one they would like to have as their own. They were allowed unlimited time to select a book. I recorded their decisions and asked the interview questions of those who had permission and consent to participate in that portion of the task ($n = 122$, or 64%). Once all students had made their preferences known, I ordered sufficient quantities and delivered the books to the students at the school approximately 1 week later.

Student interview protocol. I developed an interview protocol (see the Appendix) of 10 open-ended questions that targeted the students’ selection rationales and their selection processes. The first 5 questions asked the students to identify their preferred book, comment on its type (story or information), its content, why they selected it, and what they liked about the book. The next 5 questions focused on their general selection processes. Students were encouraged to elaborate on their responses and could make comments freely. I recorded their responses in shorthand on individual copies of the protocol. I analyzed responses to the open-ended questions using an enumerative analytic induction approach (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The students’ responses for each question were read and reread, then coded for emerging categories. Categories were
added and refined until they accounted for all responses. Several codes and categories were reduced or renamed. In another round of reading, I tallied the students’ answers by category on a data sheet that included basic descriptive statistics and representative comments. I also used chi-square analyses to compare some aspects of the data.

RESULTS

Children’s Book Choices

These first graders evidenced an overwhelming preference for the nonfiction, informational texts among the nine books featured. Of the 190 students, 159 (84%) selected nonfiction books (see Figure 1), and 46% of the children chose the same nonfiction book, Animals Nobody Loves (Simon, 2001). An additional 34% of the students preferred the poetry and fanciful nonfiction books (Sierra, 2000; Wood, 2000). Fewer than 10 students selected the five multicultural narra-

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**FIGURE 1** First graders’ selected texts by genre.
tives and the biography (see Figure 2). Thus, contrary to previous studies, these early readers clearly preferred informational reading materials in their selection of a book to own.

Both boys and girls in this study preferred informational books. Interestingly, both boys and girls and Anglo and Latino groups preferred the same three titles (all informational) from among the nine books offered, but the order of their preferences varied. The most popular title among the boys was *Animals Nobody Loves* (Simon, 2001), followed by *What Moms Can’t Do* (Wood, 2000) and the poetry book, *There’s a Zoo in Room 22* (Sierra, 2000). Among the girls, the poetry book was most popular, followed by *What Moms Can’t Do*, and then the animal information book. A majority of both boys and girls preferred the nonfiction selections; however, the percentage of boys (96%) selecting an informational book was higher than the percentage of girls (69%). A chi-square analysis comparison of book preferences and gender indicates a statistically significant ($p < .01$) gender difference for genre; the boys more consistently selected nonfiction than the girls. This was true for both the Latinos and the Anglo subgroups targeted in the study (see Mohr, 2003a, for a more detailed discussion of the comparison between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students’ preferences).

Analysis of the books’ topics or content evidences that these first graders selected books in which animals featured prominently. This is particularly true of the three most popular titles, which target animals as the subject, topic, or in illustrations. The less popular books in this study included animals in less prominent ways or not at all. Thus, the common denominator among the most selected texts for these first graders was animals, even though the books differed in size, genre, and

![FIGURE 2 First graders’ self-selected texts by title.](image-url)
format (information with photographs, illustrated A-B-C poetry, and a humorous tribute to mothers featuring cartoon dinosaurs).

Children’s Selection Rationales

The first portion of the student interview (see the Appendix) focused the students on their particular book choice. In general, it was difficult for these children to explain why they chose the kind of book they had picked. As necessary, the researcher followed the questions with other prompts, in this first case asking if the book was a storybook or an informational book. If the student responded to this prompt, the researcher asked, “How do you know?” When provided the storybook/information book choice, 85% of the students who selected *Animals Nobody Loves* deemed it an informational text. In addition, 82% of the students who made fictional choices were correct in classifying them as such. Therefore, the majority of students (58%) were able to identify the genre of their selected book, although many seemed unfamiliar with terms related to genre (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, information, biography). Students selecting some of the other choices were less able to classify them by genre. A majority of those students (82%) selecting the other nonfiction books (a biography, the A-B-C poetry book, and the tribute to mothers) classified them all as storybooks.

In this study, the accuracy of genre identification seemed dependent on text selection. Boys (70%) were more accurate in classifying their book choices than girls (30%), but this finding may be related to the fact that the boys almost exclusively picked the text with photographs of and information about dangerous animals. The girls, however, selected more varied titles and preferred mixed genre texts (e.g., fantasy/poetry, fantasy/information). Given that picture books have become more varied in their format, it is not surprising that younger readers have difficulty in classifying them by genre.

The next question asked students to relate what they thought their book was about. Again, students seemed caught off guard by the question and appeared to quickly guess what the book was about by looking at the front cover or one of the illustrations. Students’ comments were either very general (e.g., “It’s about all sorts of animals”) or very specific to one page or one illustration (“It’s about animals that eat meat”). Sixteen percent responded with “I don’t know.” Obviously, the students relied on superficial text features to make their selections and to explain their rationales, even though they were not hurried through these processes. A few students reported that they had read some or all of their respective selections during their book browsing and selection time.

The fourth question again had a follow-up prompt to clearly communicate the query, “Why did you pick this book to keep? Why is this one [book] your favorite one in this group [of books]?” Students’ rationales fell into five basic categories: topic, text features, genre, social connections, or unknown. Fewer than 5% of the
students did not give a clear answer to this question. Sixteen students (13%) gave more than one reason for their book choice. Table 2 represents the categories of the responses by the students’ primary rationale. Notably, 57% of these students (especially the boys) selected books based on the topic and quickly determined content. Another 30% of the students mentioned visible text features as significant in their selection process. Far fewer claimed that type of book or its appeal to friends or family members figured prominently in their decisions.

The students answered two other questions regarding their specific book selection: “What makes this book so special? What do you like about this book?” Of the 140 student responses to these questions, 76% \((n = 106)\) again related to topic or content. Students said they preferred books about animals, family, or books that were funny. Most of the students’ comments were direct statements about wanting books about animals. Only 12% mentioned the illustrations, even though all the books were high-quality, well-illustrated picture books. Interestingly, only two students (both Hispanic females) mentioned their books were related to their respective cultural backgrounds.

None of the students said that they picked a book because it would be easy to read or because it reminded them of themselves. Text readability did not seem to be an issue among these young readers. In addition, these students chose books that gave them insight into the world and seemed less concerned with books that mirrored their own experiences (see Mohr, 2003b, for verbatim student comments and a more detailed discussion of students’ selection rationales).

### Children’s Selection Processes

The third and final portion of the study addressed interview questions related to the students’ text selection processes and perceptions. Table 3 represents the students’ responses to Question 6, “What do you look at in [or notice about] books that makes you want to read them?” This question seeks to determine which text features attract students and what they do to select a book to read. Fifteen students gave more than one selection strategy, and two students cited three aspects of their book selection procedures. For example, “I look at the cover and then inside to see if it’s interesting” or “I look at the title and the pictures, and then read half.” (Be-
cause of the potential for multiple answers, the total number of responses \( n = 141 \) is greater than the number of students responding to the questions.

The strongest general selection mode among these students (25%) was relying on the book’s topic. Another 24% of the comments referred to looking at the pictures to make a selection. Thus, nearly half of these first graders’ responses evidenced a reliance on the perceived topic or the pictures for picking out a book. Interestingly, 17% of the students claimed that they did not know (or could not articulate) how they selected their books.

More than one third of the students (37%) in this study were able to discuss how they picked their particular book in this specific instance. However, they did not speak in general terms about their book selection processes, even though the question was framed in general terms. In other words, they told how they picked “this book,” not how they pick books as a general strategy. Many struggled to articulate a selection process; some of the students who were coded under “didn’t know” used vague terms, such as “it’s cool,” “interesting,” or “neat” to justify their selections. None of these first graders cited the recommendations of others as a strategy for selecting books, but this is not surprising because the study did not encourage students to discuss their preferences with one another.

Table 4 represents the data collected in response to “How did you make your decision to pick this one [book]? What did you do to decide?” Twelve students reported more than one selection strategy; therefore, the total number of responses to this question is 134. Nearly one third of the students’ responses (32%) mentioned visually scanning the book or books to make their selections. More girls than boys focused on topic, largely as presented on the front cover; 21% of the responses related to choosing on the basis of topic.

Choosing books based on topic or looking through the pages and pictures comprised 53% of the students’ responses. Another 25% of students were vague or said they did not know how they made their specific selections; twice as many boys as girls were unable to explain their selection processes. In addition, students seemed confused about book selection strategies, often identifying their preferences but not their selection processes. They also used language that indicated they per-
ceived their selection processes as simple, basic, or easy. None of the children complained that selecting books was difficult, even though many took considerable time looking and deciding or had trouble explaining their thought processes.

Answers to questions about students’ perceptions of social value or connections related to their preferred books are provided in Table 5. All but two students (both boys) reported that others would like the books they selected. Nearly the same percentage of boys as girls named friends whom they thought would also like their selected books (74% vs. 73%, respectively). However, a much higher percentage of boys (61%) than girls (35%) cited the book’s content/topic as the reason why others would like it. In contrast, more girls than boys gave socially oriented explanations for why others would like their selections (e.g., “When I get a good book, my friends want to look at it”; “She’s sort of like me”; “We’re best friends and we like the same things”). Some boys and girls made strong gender-related comments to follow up their recommendations, for example, “Maybe a boy [would like this book], not girls really; they don’t like cobras and stuff.”

These students were overwhelmingly sure that others would like their selected books, citing friends most often. Approximately half of the students reported that the content of their books would appeal to others. Far fewer students were unable to explain their reasoning in response to this question compared to the previous questions related to selection processes.

### TABLE 4
Specific Selection Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Genre/Format</th>
<th>Looked Through/Pictures</th>
<th>Read or Looked at Words</th>
<th>Front Cover</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Text Difficulty</th>
<th>Social Value</th>
<th>Didn’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of 134</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TABLE 5
Social References/Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>Content Rationale</th>
<th>Social Rationale</th>
<th>Picture Rationale</th>
<th>Gender Comment</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>90</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of 122</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The next question, “What are you going to do with this new book of yours?” also sought to determine social understandings, focusing on the students’ intentions for their books. Table 6 presents the data gleaned from this question. Again, some students gave multiple responses to the question, so the total number of responses ($n = 141$) exceeds the number of students interviewed.

A majority of these students’ comments (58%) reported their intentions to spend time reading or rereading their selected books; very few intended to look only at the pictures. The number of girls who mentioned reading their books “a lot” was considerably higher than the number of boys. (It is not known whether students reporting intentions to read a lot were trying to please or impress the researcher. Such influences are certainly possible.) However, these first graders were aware that books are for reading, rather than merely looking at, whether the picture books are narrative or informational in nature.

Although a sizable majority of students responded to the previous question that they thought their friends would like their selected book, only 4% of the students reported intentions of sharing their books with their friends. Nearly one quarter claimed they would share it with family members, even though only 14% previously reported that they thought family members would also like their book. In other words, the students’ notions about who would like their books and with whom they would share their books did not match. Only 7% of the students commented about taking the books home, but 9% discussed ways that they would treat the book as something special. Some of these students reported that they planned to keep their books in special places, that they would take good care of their books, or that they would read their books at special times (e.g., “I will read it to my mother on Mother’s Day”).

None of the children reported planning to show their books to their teachers. This omission was also apparent in responses to the question about who else might like the selected book. These first graders did not cite or refer to their teachers in their responses, even though the interviews were conducted at school and teachers were aware and supportive of the selection task. Perhaps the students assumed that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Read It</th>
<th>Read It</th>
<th>Look at It</th>
<th>Share It With</th>
<th>Share It With</th>
<th>Learn Information</th>
<th>Keep It Special</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of 141</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
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their teachers already knew about these (or all) books, but their not wanting to share or read their books with their respective teachers seems quite telling.

The last few questions of the student interview were “Do you think this book is easy or hard [difficult] to read? Why do you think so?” These questions were not posed to all the students in the study because I added the questions, based on some student responses, after the first day of interviews. In addition, many students chose not to answer either question. Table 7 presents the responses of 61 students (50% of the students; 33 boys and 28 girls). Even though only half of the students were prompted to respond to this question, they generated 143 different comments, more than any other question in the interview. Students had a variety of things to say in response to this question, and most had more than one comment.

Many students assessed their books as difficult to read, but they chose them anyway. Almost three times as many boys as girls perceived their selected books as difficult. Only 18% of the boys expressed confidence in their ability to read their selected books compared to 50% of the girls. Close to half (43%) of these first graders based their assessment of text difficulty on the length of words. No girls mentioned book length as a source of difficulty, but 27% of the boys (9 of the 61 respondents to the question) referred to the quantity of words or pages as making a book difficult to read. When probed for more explanation, 15 students (nearly 25%) reported a strategy for handling difficult words: getting a parent to help (13%), sounding out unknown words (7%), waiting until they were older before tackling the text (3%), or getting a reading teacher to help (2%). (These last two strategies were mentioned by only one or two students and are not represented in the table.) Only one student mentioned more than one strategy for handling difficult text (i.e., “asking for help and sounding out a word”). So, even though half of the students perceived their books to be difficult to read, only one quarter men-

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Easy</th>
<th>Difficult</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Confident About Reading</th>
<th>Worried About Words</th>
<th>Spoke About Length</th>
<th>Get Parent to Help</th>
<th>Sounding Out Words</th>
<th>Commented About Book’s Content</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>8</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>% of total responses (n = 143)</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of students responding (n = 61)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
tioned a strategy for handling a selected text. Of particular interest is that four times as many students mentioned getting help from their parents as from their teachers.

DISCUSSION

From the data presented, a few salient summaries emerge. First of all, the first graders in this study showed an overwhelming preference for nonfiction texts and for books featuring animals. When given an opportunity to self-select, both boys and girls chose nonfiction, although the girls selected a wider variety of texts overall than did the boys. This finding counters previous studies reporting that younger readers prefer fiction (e.g., Moss & McDonald, 2004). These 7- and 8-year-olds preferred nonfiction. The results of this study question that youngsters want books that mirror them in important ways. The majority of these students chose books that served as windows to the world around them, especially the animal kingdom, rather than texts with characters reflecting their gender, ethnicity, or cultural backgrounds. This does not diminish the need for multicultural literature in the classroom. Although these young readers did not prefer multicultural books, such texts may be more important to students in higher grades, thus reflecting a development process in readers that warrants further investigation.

Regarding their selection rationales, the majority of students commented on a book’s topic, with only 30% of students citing illustrations as a reason to pick a book to keep, although all of the featured books were well illustrated. A considerable number of students did not know or could not relate their selection strategies. Those who did seemed to rely on topic or illustrations, with nearly twice as many boys reporting a reliance on topic or basic content that interested them. When asked if others would also like their selections, a vast majority answered affirmatively, but boys believed others would share their interest in the topic, whereas more girls cited social similarities as reasons that others would also like their selected book. These students proclaimed their intentions to read their new books and to share them with family. These first graders believed that their friends and families would share their book interests but did not mention that their teachers would approve of their choices.

These students seemed to see these books as recreational in that they were not intimidated about perceived text difficulty and were generally confident that they would eventually be successful reading the selected books. Moreover, if help were needed, these students reported that they would get a parent, not a teacher, to help. For some reason, these students rarely mentioned their teachers with regard to who could help select, who would like to read, or who would help with reading these books, even though the selection process occurred during school hours and just outside their classroom doors.
As with many previous studies, there were gender differences (e.g., Chick & Heilman-Houser, 2000). The girls were more varied in their selections, but in this case many more girls mirrored the male preference for nonfiction over narrative. This finding is perhaps the most salient of the study in that there is some indication of gender equity and a surprising focus on informational text. A higher percentage of boys than girls reported attending to book topic or the words in the text when selecting books. The girls gave more attention to the illustrations. Boys in this study evidenced more difficulty explaining their selection strategies than did girls. Boys were more adamant and made more references to the content or topic of the selected books as reasons for others also liking them. More boys than girls likewise related text topic with text difficulty. The boys were drawn to the topic of a book, despite its perceived level of difficulty. Some boys but no girls expressed a concern about book length. Girls in this study expressed more confidence in their reading of self-selected books than did boys. Thus, the question added to the initial interview—“Do you think this book is easy or hard [difficult] to read?”—proved to be one of the most interesting. The richness of these data warrants further research into perceived text difficulty among young readers and how text difficulty influences text selection and independent reading strategy use across genders.

Another more contemporary need is to look at format and book browsing more closely. As noted by Moss and McDonald (2004), books that allow readers to “dip in and out” via nonlinear reading paths are commonly checked out of libraries, compared to texts that are linear and thus require sequenced reading. They suggest a new approach to understanding children’s choices: “starting from the potential importance of the design characteristics of different text types and how this might steer text choice, by both suggesting and enabling different kinds of reading experience” (p. 402). The present study supports a perspective that, as with Internet sites and Web pages, contemporary consumers appreciate being able to browse through books. Informational texts afford the dip in and out approach to leisure reading and allow access to more difficult texts that do not have to be read in their entirety to be appreciated. This relates to what Barron (2001) refers to as children “doing books,” a combination of flipping through, looking at, reading some, sharing with another, and closely examining illustrations that young readers in her study evidenced during their self-selected reading time. Consuming books appears to involve more than traditional reading, and such aspects of literacy development deserve more critical analysis.

Some important limitations to this study should be noted. Of course, the inclusion of only first-grade subjects, the use of a limited number of books, and classroom factors limit the generalizability of these findings. To offset the narrow grade-level focus and the influence of particular teachers and classroom issues, 10 different classrooms with a total of 190 students of diverse backgrounds participated. The perusal process afforded only nine books from which to choose; however, these books varied in genre, topic, format, illustration style,
and text difficulty. The students were not rushed to choose a book, and their selection process was not timed; recording the amount of time students took to pick a book and to compare any time differences across gender, ethnicity, and reading level would have added more data. The current study did not incorporate information about students’ reading levels or verbal skills as they might have related to the selection or interview aspects of the study. More important, however, this study encouraged students to select a book that they wanted to own, rather than just check out of a library. So, although a longitudinal study of text selection would yield a variety of benefits, this snapshot profile renders many insights and possibilities for further study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student text selection processes is a recurring research topic but one that remains fertile for additional research. Replicating this study with newer books (including sports books, for example) with similar genres would help clarify and confirm the findings presented here. Completing a follow-up study of the same student population would also add information about changes related to developmental or cultural influences. Conducting a similar study with students in older grades would provide a developmental comparison to this study.

Because students could clearly articulate their preferences, but many could not articulate their selection processes, the careful crafting of questions used in student interviews is crucial. Further research might include asking readers additional questions, such as, “How do you plan to read this book?” and in more than one context (e.g., at home or at school). Students could also be queried during their book-choosing times to determine if the same or other selection processes are revealed. Combining interviews with journal entries and library records would certainly yield more triangulated data (Moss & McDonald, 2004).

This study included evidence of considerable confusion about book genre. Here are some students’ responses to the question “What kind of book is it?”: “It’s real and it’s fantasy”; “It’s information and that means it’s not real”; “It’s a story because it has pictures”; and “It’s not no information book. It’s too much like a kid’s book.” A practical implication of this is that teachers should model and teach book language that helps students understand text genre. One resultant study might assess students’ selection rationales before and after explicit instruction on text genre.

Even among these young first graders there was evidence of gender stereotyping, with more and stronger comments from boys about which books would appeal to which gender. Other studies confirm this stronger gender bias among boys (Dutro, 2001–2002). More studies that pursue students’ perceptions of “girls’ books versus boys’ books” among modern picture books should be conducted.
Observing teachers regarding their selection and presentation of books in the classroom might augment a gender-based investigation.

Nearly 75% of these first graders felt that their friends would like their respective book choices, whereas only 14% reported that family members would like their selections. However, when asked what they would do with their books, far more students evidenced intentions to share their books with their families (23%) than with their friends (4%). This discrepancy warrants further research. These findings may indicate issues related to social status that accompanied this study or reflect students’ impressions that independent reading is done at home, not at school. Social aspects generally correlate with student age and development. Studies that compare social factors related to text selection processes among younger versus older readers could better address these issues.

Teachers did not figure prominently in this study or in some other studies targeting recreational reading (Rasinski et al., 1994). Students rarely mentioned teachers as persons who might like the selected texts; they were not mentioned when students talked about with whom they would share their books. In addition, only 2% of the students who discussed ways to read their selected texts mentioned getting help from their teachers. These findings were surprising and may indicate a need for renewed research regarding the role of teachers in students’ selection of recreational reading materials. Promoting books is different than promoting book selection strategies (Linek, Mohr, & Rasinski; 1994; Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi, 1996). Although the goal is certainly not to make students more dependent on teachers, exposure is not enough if students are to become independent readers. Direct instruction of text structure seems critical.

An aspect related to teachers and classroom instruction is the use of reading strategies. These students did not evidence multiple strategies in their text-selection processes or in how they planned to read their books (if they were deemed difficult to read). Their reported strategies for handling difficult texts were getting help (from a parent or teacher), sounding out unknown words, or waiting until they were older. Given that the books were all picture books and that the students selected texts that appealed to their interests, one would expect some comprehension strategies that referred to using picture clues or prior knowledge. Close observation of such young students’ reading behaviors of selected texts would shed light on this important process.

The analysis of students’ recreational reading behaviors and their instructional implications contain many layers. Although recreational reading has been an ongoing emphasis among literacy educators and researchers, the conversation should continue because the recent focus on developing readers, more varied books, and expanded literacies demand a consistently updated understanding of recreational reading (Kincade, 1991). In this case, the strong preference for informational books among first graders may indicate that the information age has truly taken hold in even the youngest literacy learners.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This study was supported by a Research Initiation Grant from the University of North Texas.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX:**

**INTERVIEW PROTOCOL OF CHILDREN’S BOOK PREFERENCES**

I have many books here for you to look at. Look carefully at all these books and then decide which one book you would like to have as your own. You can only pick one of these books to keep, so take your time to choose your favorite one.

1. Did you pick one book that you would like to keep? Show me which one is your favorite. I would like to ask you a few questions about this book and I want to write down some of what you say. Is that okay?
2. What kind of book is it? [If the student needs help, ask.] Is this book a story book or an information book? How do you know? (focus on genre)
3. What do you think the book is about? (focus on topic)
4. Tell me, why did you pick this book to keep? Why is this one [book] your favorite one in this group [of books]? (focus on personal connection)
5. What makes this book so special? What do you like about this book? (focus on features)
6. When you look at books, what do you look at in [or notice about] books that makes you want to read them? (focus on general selection strategies)
7. How did you make your decision to pick this one [book]? What did you do to decide? (focus on selection strategies for this book)
8. Do you think other students will like this book? Who else do you think might like this book? Why or why not? (focus on social aspects)
9. What are you going to do with this new book of yours? (focus on purpose and intent)
10. Is there anything else you want to tell me about this book?

Thank you for talking to me about these books. I will put your name down for this book and bring it to you in your classroom next week so that you can take it home with you.