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Book selection approaches and the middle school student

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Abstract

"Reading is a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment. The degree to which students can read and understand text in all formats and all contexts is a key indicator of success in school and in life" (AASL, 2007, p. 1). As indicated in this AASL statement, it is the job of the teacher and teacher librarian to encourage independent reading among their students. However, there is often a lack of knowledge surrounding the level of success in the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books of interest to them. This inhibits teachers and teacher librarians from collaboratively providing the necessary level of guidance to keep students engaged in reading. The purpose of this study was to explore the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books, as well as the level of success of those approaches, and to provide suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students. This study showed that students relied heavily on familiarity when selecting independent reading material. Three of the top four approaches reported by students (favorite genre, topic, or subject; familiar author or series; and discussion, conversation, or recommendation) all rely on the students having some form of prior knowledge about the book they are choosing. These three were also the approaches that had the highest success rate.
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ABSTRACT

“Reading is a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment. The degree to which students can read and understand text in all formats and all contexts is a key indicator of success in school and in life” (AASL, 2007, p. 1). As indicated in this AASL statement, it is the job of the teacher and teacher librarian to encourage independent reading among their students. However, there is often a lack of knowledge surrounding the level of success in the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books of interest to them. This inhibits teachers and teacher librarians from collaboratively providing the necessary level of guidance to keep students engaged in reading.

The purpose of this study was to explore the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books, as well as the level of success of those approaches, and to provide suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students. This study showed that students relied heavily on familiarity when selecting independent reading material. Three of the top four approaches reported by students (favorite genre, topic, or subject; familiar author or series; and discussion, conversation, or recommendation) all rely on the students having some form of prior knowledge about the book they are choosing. These three were also the approaches that had the highest success rate.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Jack, a middle school student, is headed to the library - again. His teachers keep telling him that he needs a free reading book with him at all times, but he can’t seem to find one that he likes. He has used many different approaches in trying to find a book that he actually wants to finish. He has looked at what his classmates are reading and checked out those same books. He has tried to find a book that had an interesting front cover. He has even tried to read some of the Iowa Teen Award winners that the librarian has on a special shelf. He has to check in with his language arts teacher again tomorrow and is hoping he can find a book before then.

Problem Statement

The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) put forth the common belief that reading is a window to the world. AASL also emphasizes the benefits of reading in all formats: “Reading is a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment. The degree to which students can read and understand text in all formats and all contexts is a key indicator of success in school and in life” (AASL, 2007, p. 1). This common belief in the importance of reading is also represented in an AASL position statement explaining that reading proficiency increases when students spend more time reading independently (AASL, 2010). In response to this research, it becomes the job of the teacher and teacher librarian to encourage independent reading among their students. Teachers, especially teacher librarians, are vital in establishing an environment conducive for creating a reading culture with their students. The American Association of School
Librarians’ (AASL, 2009) *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* details a list of actions that the school librarian is responsible for implementing with students. Specific roles of the teacher librarian relating to independent reading include: “Creates an environment where independent reading is valued, promoted, and encouraged” and “fosters reading for various pursuits, including personal pleasure, knowledge, and ideas” (p. 21). One way teachers and teacher librarians can encourage independent reading is by ensuring that students are successfully selecting books that interest them. In order to properly do this, teachers and teacher librarians need to gather knowledge on the approaches that students take when attempting to select a book.

Independent reading can go by many names such as: free reading, choice reading, recreational reading, voluntary reading, or leisure reading. These terms will be used interchangeably in this paper. They refer to reading that students have chosen of their own volition. “Independent reading is done for information or for pleasure. No one assigns it; no one requires a report; no one checks on comprehension” (Cullinan, 2000, p. 1). In summary, independent reading is when students choose to read because it interests them.

One issue that stands in the way of independent reading is students’ difficulty finding reading materials of interest to them. As in the scenario presented earlier, “Jack” and students like him, are often expected to have an independent reading book at all times, but find it difficult to locate a book that actually interests them. In a recent study, Hughes-Hassel and Lutz (2006) investigated the reasons that middle schoolers do not read. A large number of students reported the following as reasons they do not read: can’t find a
good book, can't get into stories, and that it is boring/not fun. These findings demonstrate the importance of assisting students in locating independent reading materials of interest.

The current research investigating the approaches students take when selecting books will inform classroom teachers in the building and organization of their classroom libraries as well as provide useful information for teacher librarians. These individuals are invested in the books that students are reading and are concerned if students are not successful in selecting the right book for them. This demonstrates their recognition of the correlation between time spent reading and reading proficiency (Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990). Finally, it will benefit parents in encouraging reading at home with their children. This research is important because it provides insight into the kinds of approaches students are taking so that teachers and teacher librarians can be best prepared to aid students in their future searches. The overall goal is for teachers and teacher librarians to help middle school students find books they enjoy, and after reading this research, the hope is that teachers and teacher librarians will have gained the knowledge to assist them in achieving this goal.

Prior studies on the topic have focused on observing and reporting the motivations for leisure reading and/or the approaches students take when selecting free reading materials (Hopper, 2005; Hughes-Hassell & Lutz, 2006; Elliot, 2015). However, studies conducted on the success of the book selection approaches taken by students are needed to better understand students' thought processes when selecting books in relation to their feelings of success and enjoyment when completing books and the ways teachers may support this process. For a free reading book choice to be considered successful, students
must report finishing and enjoying the book. This study will not only observe book selection strategies and approaches used by middle school students when selecting free reading materials, but will also determine which approaches assisted students in successfully selecting a book.

**Summary of Problem Statement**

There is a lack of knowledge surrounding the level of success in the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books of interest to them; this inhibits teachers and teacher librarians from collaboratively providing the necessary level of guidance to keep students engaged in reading.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books and to provide suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students.

**Research Questions**

1. What approaches do middle school students take when independently selecting a free reading book?

2. Which approaches lead students to being successful in their book search, in other words, finding a book that interests them, and that they complete? Conversely, which approaches hinder students in successfully finding a book?
Assumptions/Limitations

This research is limited to a small sample of middle school students at a single middle school building in the state of Iowa.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to explore the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books and to provide suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students. Prior research related to this topic is categorized into three topics: adolescent reading attitudes/interests/motivations, book selection behaviors/approaches, and leisure reading and student achievement. This background will provide context for the current study of students’ reading selection approaches.

Adolescent Reading Motivations

Ivey and Broaddus (2001) conducted a survey relating to middle school students’ attitudes toward reading. The purpose of the survey was to identify the aspects of middle school reading instruction that help to foster reading engagement. They conducted this survey with 1,765 sixth-grade students in 23 schools. Open-ended and short-answer questions were asked along with checklist items. After the initial survey was analyzed, the researchers conducted follow-up interviews with 16 girls and 15 boys from three different classrooms in which a large number of students reported engagement during the initial survey. Ivey and Broaddus found that “students clearly preferred two types of activities, free reading time and the teacher reading out loud” (p. 360). Another finding, regarding what motivated students to read, was that many of the students (42%) were motivated by finding good reading materials and being able to choose those materials.

While Ivey and Broaddus (2001) focused their study on the ability of instruction to foster reading engagement, Hughes-Hassell and Lutz (2006) conducted a survey focused
on student attitudes toward leisure reading. The purpose of their study was "to better understand the leisure reading habits of students" (p. 39). A total of 214 rural students, in grades 6-8 took part in the study. They were 44.4% male and 53.7% female and 1.9% of students not specifying gender. Students were given a 20 item questionnaire focused on factors relating to free reading: whether teenagers read in their leisure time; if so, what, when, and why they read; and if they don’t read, why not? Hughes-Hassell and Lutz found that, "Seventy-three percent of students said they engage in leisure reading: 24% of the students said they read “constantly,” while 49% indicated that they “read when they get a chance.” Twenty-two percent said they read only what they were assigned for school, while 6% said they did not read at all (p. 40). An analysis of the survey found that the three most common reasons reported for leisure reading were: for fun; I get attached to the characters I’m reading about; and it’s relaxing. The three most common reasons reported for not taking part in leisure reading were: I’d rather watch TV; I’d rather spend time with my friends; and I’d rather play video games.

Hughes-Hassell and Rodge (2007) conducted a nearly identical study regarding the leisure reading habits of adolescents. The purpose of the study was to develop an understanding of the leisure reading habits of youth in urban areas. The study was conducted in an urban middle school serving approximately 1,340 students in grades 5-8. The student body was predominantly Latino and African American and 86% of students qualified for free or reduced lunch. A total of 584 surveys, containing exactly the same questions as the survey in Hughes-Hassell and Lutz’s (2006) study, were completed and analyzed. The first finding was that the number of students reporting that they engage in
leisure reading was consistent with the first study. The results did start to differ a little when analyzing the questions of why students read or why they do not read. The three most common reasons reported for leisure reading were: for fun; to learn something/it's educational; and it's relaxing. The three most common reasons reported for not taking part in leisure reading were: I'd rather watch TV; I'd rather spend time with friends; and I like other activities better. The three previously described studies are relevant to research about student attitudes toward reading because they show students are motivated by time to read (Hughes-Hassell & Lutz, 2006; Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007), the teacher reading aloud (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001) finding good reading materials and having choices in those materials (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001). Those who do not engage consistently in leisure reading included over half of the students in both rural and urban areas with the reason being that they enjoyed other activities instead.

**Book Selection Behaviors/Approaches**

Hopper (2005) conducted a study to investigate the answer to the question, “What, if anything, are teenagers choosing to read?” This study was completed with the involvement of postgraduate pre-service teachers from a university in England. The student teachers “participated in a study into adolescent reading patterns in order to inform and improve their own teaching” (p. 114). Thirty student teachers and 707 students took part in the study. Students were from a number of different public school districts, but all students ranged in age from 11-15. The data was gathered through a survey completed by the students. The survey questions “were constructed to elicit data relating to patterns of fiction reading” (p. 115). Hopper found that clear categories for choice emerged when students
were asked their reasons for choosing books. The most common reason given was prior knowledge of book or author. It was also cited frequently that students chose a book based on a series that they enjoyed. In a close second in reasons for choosing books was the appearance of the book. This included details such as the front cover, colors used, pictures, and font of printing. Recommendations from others, television or film influence, and genre rounded out the top five reasons for choosing books.

Rather than focus on what teenagers are reading, Bleidt (2011) turned her attention to how students utilize and perceive their school library. The purpose of the study was to identify the ways that middle school students utilize their libraries. The study focused on the following four research questions:

- How often are middle school students utilizing their school library?
- How are middle school students utilizing their school library?
- What are middle school students’ perceptions of the usefulness of the library?
- What do students perceive as the strengths/weakness of their school library?

The study was conducted at ten high-need rural schools. Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in these ten schools were asked to participate. In total, 1,509 (90% of all students) agreed to participate. Participants were mostly Hispanic, but also included white, black, and Asian/Native American students. All students ages ranged from 11-15. The study was given to students using an online survey instrument. The survey “contained 21 questions or statements, consisting of three question styles: a simple checklist, 16 statements using a Likert response scale, and two open-ended questions” (p. 73). One result of interest was that relating to how students utilize the school library. Students completed a checklist in answering the question, “What do you do when you come to the library?” The top three
activities described were: read books, use the computer, and check out fiction books. Much further down on the list, with a small fraction of students reporting them, were: get advice on good books to read and check out informational books. This data suggests that many students don’t consider going to the library to get advice on book selection. In other findings, 78% of students who utilized the library for book suggestions expressed that the school librarian helped them find fictional books they liked to read, while only 68% of students expressed that the school library helped them find informational books they liked to read.

Elliot (2015) combined the previous two ideas to investigate influences on student book selection and the implications they have on the school library program. The purpose of her study was “to explore various aspects that influence students when selecting leisure reading materials” (p. 3). The researcher was looking to answer the following questions:

What influences students in selecting leisure reading material?  
Do boys and girls differ in their selection process?  
How can librarians use their knowledge of student selection processes to help make their library more effective?

This study was conducted with eighth grade students in a large, midwestern school district. Twenty-five students, out of approximately 700, eighth graders in the district participated in the study. The 11 boys and 14 girls were divided into five focus groups containing five students each. The students took part in a focus group scenario discussion regarding the steps they take when searching for leisure reading books. After the focus group discussion, each student completed a five question survey with further questions regarding influences in book selection. The researcher recorded several important findings. First, in regard to
influences on student book selection, it was found that peer recommendation had by far the
greatest influence on students. In fact, 88% of the participants noted that their peers’
suggestions impacted what they read. Findings were also analyzed regarding when students
visit the library. The results showed that study hall time was by far the most common time
used to visit the library, with 60% of students reporting utilizing study hall time to do so.
Lastly, the researcher found the highest percentage of students reporting that they would
prefer to be unassisted during their time in the library spent searching for a book. The three
previously described studies are relevant to research into book selection
behaviors/approaches because they show that top student approaches when selecting a
book include: peer recommendation, familiar author or series, and book appearance
(Hopper, 2005). They also show that students do not consider the library as a place to get
advice on book selection and would prefer to search for a book unassisted (Bleidt, 2011;
Elliot, 2015).

**Leisure Reading and Student Achievement**

In an attempt to investigate a link between leisure reading and student achievement,
Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) conducted a study focused on growth in reading
and how children spend their time outside of school. The purposes of their study were “to
describe children’s out-of-school activities, with a special focus on reading, and to examine
the relationship of out-of-school activities to reading achievement” (p. 287). The study was
conducted with 155 fifth-grade students, including 52 students from a rural area and 103
students from a middle-class area of a small city in east central Illinois. The sample
contained 85 boys and 70 girls. An activity form was created by the researchers and
presented to the students. This form was filled out on a daily basis and required the students to answer questions regarding the activities they were partaking in and the time spent partaking in each activity. Students in the rural area school filled out forms daily for an 8-week period, while students in the city district filled out forms for a 26-week period. Researchers also administered a battery of three reading tests to the students to determine reading proficiency. The first test focused on reading comprehension, the second test on vocabulary knowledge, and the final test on reading speed. These tests were given at the beginning and the end of the research periods and researchers took previous standardized test scores from second grade into consideration as well when analyzing results. The researchers found that “reading books was the out-of-school activity that proved to have the strongest association with reading proficiency” (p. 297). Time spent reading books was strongly associated with reading ability of the fifth grade students. Researchers also found that time spent reading books was the greatest predictor of growth as a reader between second grade and fifth grade.

Taylor, Frye, and Maruyama (1990) conducted a study to elaborate further on the findings of the Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) study. They took a closer look at the correlation between time spent reading and reading growth. The purpose of their study was to “investigate the effects of time spent reading at school and at home on intermediate grade students’ reading achievement” (p.351). The study was conducted with 195 students from 11 different classes of fifth and sixth grade students. The students attended one of two intermediate schools in a suburban school district and had reading abilities at a variety of levels. Students completed reading logs for a period of four months. The logs required
students to record the amount of time spent and the number of pages read each day for both assigned reading and pleasure reading. Reading at school was also differentiated from reading at home. Standardized tests were administered at the beginning and the end of the study to investigate the impact of time spent reading on students’ reading growth. The researchers found that “the results of this study support the widely held belief that time spent on silent reading at school is beneficial to intermediate grade children (p. 357). From the study, conclusions can be drawn that time spent reading in school contributes significantly to growth in reading achievement.

In a much more recent study, due to the recent decline in leisure reading, Smith and Day (2013) decided to once again study the correlation between leisure reading and academic achievement. The purpose of the study was to investigate the role that sociocultural factors play in leisure reading and student achievement. The study was conducted with middle school students at a rural school district in North Carolina. The racial breakdown of the students was as follows: 38.1% white, 19.5% black, 40.1% Latino, and 2.3% other. Students were given two different surveys to complete. The first survey was meant to gather information regarding leisure reading habits. The survey aimed at answering the following questions:

What influences middle school children’s leisure reading habits?
Why do middle school children read?
Who encourages them to read?
Where do they get their reading materials?
What is the most popular reading material for children in elementary and middle school?
The second survey was meant to gather socio-cultural information such as: gender, race or ethnicity, academic success, parents’ educational levels, and citizenship. There were several findings of interest to mention from this study. The first is relating to leisure reading and academic success. The researchers found that students with higher academic success (especially those earning A’s and B’s) spent more time leisure reading and bought books more frequently than students who were not scoring as high academically. A second finding of interest relates to the parents’ educational levels. It was found that students whose parents had a higher level of education were the same students who reported spending larger amounts of time engaging in leisure reading. The three previously described studies are relevant to research about leisure reading and student achievement because they show that time spent leisure reading, both in and out of school, contribute significantly to growth in reading and higher grades in school.

Summary

The previous studies demonstrated the importance of free reading and its connection to reading achievement and growth for students (Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Smith & Day; 2013). Other researchers turned their focus to student reading motivation and found that many students enjoyed other activities rather than consistently engaging in leisure reading (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001; Hughes-Hassell & Lutz, 2006; Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007). Finally, additional research showed students typically use peer recommendation, familiar author or series, and book appearance to select their leisure reading material (Hopper, 2005: Bleidt, 2011; Elliot, 2015). This researcher will take what was learned from previous studies and incorporate it into this study. This
study will investigate the approaches students take when selecting leisure reading material and will seek to determine which selection approaches help, as well as hinder, students in successfully finding a book and completing it.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to explore the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books and to provide suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students. Numerous studies have focused on observing and reporting the motivations for leisure reading, and a few have focused on the approaches students take when selecting free reading materials. Through this study, the researcher further explored the book selection approaches employed by students and focused on the success of these approaches in an effort to answer the following questions:

1. What approaches do middle school students take when independently selecting a free reading book?

2. Which approaches lead students to being successful in their book search, in other words, to finding a book that interests them, and that they complete, and which approaches hinder students in successfully finding a book?

Research Design

A quantitative research design was used to conduct this study. Data was collected using a survey research method. "Survey research is a useful method, enabling researchers to statistically "estimate the distribution of characteristics in a population," based on a sample that is only a fraction of that population" (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 256). The survey research method was appropriate for this study because the researcher was interested in
gathering data on student behavior when selecting free reading materials. Wildemuth (2009) explained that survey research “supports the collection of a variety of data, including the beliefs, opinions, attributes, and behaviors of the respondents” (p. 256).

Participants

This study took place in a large, midwestern school district of Iowa. Students that participated in the study were a sample of sixth grade students in the district. The researcher invited all sixth grade students enrolled in her language arts classes, and 38 of those 63 students invited for the study (60%) had parental permission and agreed to participate in the study. These students had not previously been formally taught any strategies for selecting books. This study was conducted with sixth graders because reading for pleasure often drops by 50% in middle school (Gander, 2013).

Procedures

Data Sources

The researcher developed a survey consisting of close-ended questions related to student approaches to book selection for recreational reading and the success of those approaches. Careful consideration was given to the administration of the survey so that it would be “accessible to and comfortable for [the] sample members” (Wildemuth, 2009, p. 267). The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of seven questions embedded in a language arts class reading survey that were completed electronically through Google Forms. The survey was completed during approximately five minutes of the free reading time at the beginning of the language arts class. The survey information for this study is a subset of data from a form completed by students as a part of their language arts requirements.
Research was gathered over a four week period of time. All students who finished a book in the four week period completed the seven survey questions as part of the language arts class requirements, but the only survey data used for this study were from those students with parental permission and student assent for the research. The survey mentioned is appropriate to this study because it allowed the researcher to easily include a large number of participants in the study.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher used frequencies to analyze the data that was gathered. Wildemuth (2009) explains that, “When analyzing nominal data, you most often will begin by counting how many cases there are in a particular category of a particular variable. These counts can then be organized and displayed in a table, referred to as a *frequency distribution*” (p. 348). The frequency of the close-ended questions were easily tabulated. Each survey submission was tabulated as a separate entry. The researcher focused on overall numbers.

**Limitations**

One limitation with survey research is that students may not correctly understand the questions and, therefore, may not give accurate answers. Another limitation of the methodology for this study is that the survey is only being completed at one grade level in one district in Iowa. Also, the survey only serves as a snapshot in time, as students may try additional book selection approaches in the future.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The researcher developed a survey consisting of close-ended questions related to student approaches to book selection for recreational reading and the success of those approaches. A total of 38 students agreed to participate in the study. The survey consisted of seven questions embedded in a language arts class reading survey and were completed electronically through Google Forms. The survey was completed during approximately five minutes of the free reading time at the beginning of the language arts class. Research was gathered over a four week period of time.

Approaches Used by Students

In response to research question one, survey responses provided insight into the book selection approaches used by students. First, students were asked to record all of the approaches they used when selecting their most recent choice book. Figure 1 shows their responses.
When you chose this book, what helped you make your decision? (Check all that apply)

![Bar chart showing book selection approaches used]

- Favorite genre, topic, or subject was the selection approach used by the highest number of students, with 18 students (47%) reporting it as an approach they used. Following closely behind that as frequently used approaches were cover or appearance of the book; familiar author or series; and discussion, conversation, or recommendation. These three approaches were reported by 16 students each, which demonstrates 42% of participants use these strategies. The number of students reporting each approach drops off at this point with 9 students (24%) stating that books on display in the library helped them in making their decisions.

*Figure 1. Book Selection Approaches Used*
book selection. Less frequently used approaches were book trailers and selecting books based on a movie, TV show, or video game; only four students said they used each of these. And lastly, three students responded with other approaches such as: teacher read-aloud, reading the back of the book, and getting the book as a gift.

Next, students were asked to decide which single approach was most helpful when selecting their most recent book. Figure 2 shows their responses.

![Bar chart showing the most helpful approach for book selection.](image)

*Figure 2. Most Helpful Approach*
When asked to consider which single approach was most helpful, logically, some of the same responses appeared. Two different approaches were most helpful in selecting a book: familiar author or series and discussion, conversation, or recommendation. Each of these approaches were identified by 10 students, or 26% of participants for each approach. In addition, favorite genre, topic, or subject were selected as most helpful by eight students (21%). The book selection approaches that were least likely to be considered helpful were cover or appearance of the book (with four students) and book trailers; seeing books on display in the library; and being based on a movie, TV show, or video game (all with one student). In addition, three students provided a different approach that was most helpful. These included teacher read-aloud and reading the back of the book.

In thinking ahead to the next time students search for a book, participants were asked to record the two book selection approaches they think they will use. Figure 3 shows their responses.
Next time you check out a book, which two approaches do you think you’ll be most likely to use?

![Bar chart showing frequency of approaches]

**Figure 3.** Future Approaches

Once again, some of the same trends appear with the results from this question. Familiar author or series was the most popular response with 19 students (50%) reporting that they will use the approach in the future. Cover or appearance of the book; favorite genre, topic, or subject; and discussion, conversation, or recommendation were also popular choices, with 16, 13, and 12 students choosing these responses respectively as their most likely approach for selecting a book. Interestingly, eight students reported seeing books on display
as an approach they would be likely to use next time, even though only one student had previously recognized that approach as being the most helpful. Few students planned for the future use of the approaches of selecting a book that is based on a movie, TV show, or video game and book trailers. One student recorded other as his/her response and specified that reading the back of the book is a selection approach that he/she will use in the future.

**Success of Approaches**

Survey responses also provided insight into the success of the book selection approaches that students used. One question asked students to rate how much they liked the book, based on a 1-5 rating. A score of five was representative of loving a book, while a score of one was representative of strongly disliking a book. Students’ ratings were then compared to the book selection approach they found most helpful when selecting that book in order to draw conclusions regarding the success of each book response. In order to make the data more meaningful, only approaches used by at least 10% of the sample population were examined. The data is included in Figure 4.
In analyzing the data, students who used a familiar author or series as their book selection approach were most likely to enjoy the book they chose. Students using that approach rated their books very high, with an average rating of 4.9 out of 5. Following closely behind was the selection approach of choosing a book based on a favorite genre, topic, or subject. Students who used that approach rated their books high as well, with an average rating of 4.25 out of 5. In addition, students who used a discussion, conversation, or recommendation to help make their book selection rated their liking of the book they read on average a 3.9 out of 5. Finally, with the lowest rating by far, students who reported using the cover or appearance reported the least interest in the books they selected, on average rating the books only 2.75 out of 5.
Summary of Findings

Overall, four approaches were predominantly used by sixth grade students when independently selecting a free reading book: choosing a favorite genre, topic, or subject; choosing a familiar author or series; taking part in a discussion/conversation or receiving a recommendation; and using the cover or appearance of the book. To determine the success of each approach, two things were considered: whether the student completed the book or chose to abandon it and whether the student enjoyed the book. Familiarity seemed to be key to successful book selection. Choosing a familiar author, series, genre, topic, or subject lead students to be successful in their book search. On the other hand, using the cover or appearance of the book in order to make a book selection, hindered students in successfully finding a book. Although students reported the cover or appearance as the lowest rating in terms of enjoyment, 42% of the sample population reported that they will use this approach the next time they select a book.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"Reading is a foundational skill for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment. The degree to which students can read and understand text in all formats and all contexts is a key indicator of success in school and in life" (AASL, 2007, p. 1). As indicated in this AASL statement, it is the job of the teacher and teacher librarian to encourage independent reading among their students. However, there is often a lack of knowledge surrounding the level of success in the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books of interest to them. This inhibits teachers and teacher librarians from collaboratively providing the necessary level of guidance to keep students engaged in reading.

The purpose of this study was to explore the approaches middle school students take when selecting independent reading books, as well as the level of success of those approaches, and to provide suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students. This study showed that students relied heavily on familiarity when selecting independent reading material.

Several patterns emerged through the analysis of students’ book selection approaches, especially in regards to familiarity. Three of the top four approaches reported by students (favorite genre, topic, or subject; familiar author or series; and discussion, conversation, or recommendation) all rely on the students having some form of prior knowledge about the book they are choosing. This is a key insight because it demonstrates the importance of exposing students to a large quantity of books. These exposures can be in
a variety of ways, such as frequent book talks, class read-arounds (where each student reads a short passage from their current book in hopes of enticing other students), pulling books relevant to a certain unit in core classes, or having a featured author wall in the classroom. Hughes-Hassel and Lutz (2006) found that a large number of students reported “can’t find a good book” as a main reason that they do not spend time reading. The activities mentioned above are meant to increase the probability that students will find a book they enjoy.

There is also a possible trend to consider in regards to students choosing books based on familiarity. When students find that choosing a book that is familiar to them has led them to reading success, it makes sense then that students would continue to choose familiar books in hopes of continued reading success. It is possible that the results of this survey demonstrate this trend. Students who found those “familiarity” selection approaches to be useful in the past were more likely to use them again. Teachers and teacher librarians may wish to use this idea of familiarity when advising students, especially struggling readers. Struggling readers may thrive off of the familiarity that comes with a series or topic, as they have prior knowledge about characters and setting before starting the book.

It was also important to consider the success of student approaches to determine if the approaches were aiding or hindering them. The same approaches mentioned before that rely on student familiarity (favorite genre, topic, or subject, familiar author or series, and discussion, conversation, or recommendation), were also the approaches that had the highest success rate. Success rate was determined by comparing the student approach used and the overall rating that the student gave the book. It was found, however, that choosing
a book according to the cover or appearance seemed to hinder students’ enjoyment of the book. Many students used this approach, but the overall rating of enjoyment was quite low. This is an important finding because it demonstrates that teachers and teacher librarians should be strongly encouraging students to use other selection approaches. Using the cover or appearance of the book may be an acceptable place to start, but students should incorporate other selection approaches in addition. The old saying to “never judge a book by it’s cover” definitely seems to apply here. Taylor, Frye, and Maruyama (1990) reported that results of their study “support the widely held belief that time spent on silent reading at school is beneficial to intermediate grade children” (p. 357). Successful book selection approaches will lead to increased time spent on independent reading. This will help students in all aspects of their education.

Questions 1 and 2 in the survey did not lead to any significant findings. They were included with more of a grading purpose for the researcher as the language arts teacher. There was no pattern noticed as far as titles read by students. Only one student reported abandoning his or her book and logically rated the book with a score of 1.

**Future Research**

After analysis, the researcher feels there may be ways to improve this study in the future. This study was conducted with one small sample of sixth grade students from a school with a mostly homogeneous population. In the future, this study could be improved by surveying a larger number of students. It would also be a benefit to survey students from schools in a variety of places, in order to get a better representation of all sixth grade
students. It would be interesting to see if the trends from this current study would continue to be displayed in a larger population.

There are also things to consider for follow-up studies. It was found that “favorite genre, topic, or subject” was one of the top approaches used by sixth grade students in the study. Possible follow-up studies could use this finding and further investigate the role that genre plays in book selection. This could be done by comparing a traditional library organization with a genrefied library collection to consider the effects they have on success of student book selection. In addition, a follow-up study could be conducted in regards to struggling readers. A similar survey could be conducted with those students who are not meeting grade-level proficiency markers. It would be interesting to see what patterns would emerge with such a survey.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Questions adapted from Hopper (2005) and Elliot (2015).

1. What is the title of the last book you read?

___

2. Did you finish the book?

☐ Yes, I finished the book.
☐ No, I chose to abandon the book.

3. How much did you enjoy the book? (Give a rating even if you didn’t finish the book)

☐ 1 (I really didn’t enjoy this book!)
☐ 2
☐ 3
☐ 4
☐ 5 (I absolutely loved this book!)

4. When you chose this book, what helped you make your decision? (Check all that apply)

☐ Book trailers
☐ Seeing books on display in the library (on top of shelves, pictures in the hallway, etc.)
☐ The cover or appearance of the book
☐ Favorite genre, topic, or subject
☐ Author or series you are familiar with
☐ Book is based on a movie, TV show, or video game
☐ Discussion/conversation with a friend, classmate, teacher, librarian, or parent
☐ Other: _______________

5. Out of the boxes you checked in question 4, which ONE approach helped you the most in making your book choice?
6. Which approach do you think is the least helpful when you are selecting a book?

☐ Book trailers
☐ Seeing books on display in the library (on top of shelves, pictures in the hallway, etc.)
☐ The cover or appearance of the book
☐ Favorite genre, topic, or subject
☐ Author or series you are familiar with
☐ Book is based on a movie, TV show, or video game
☐ Discussion/conversation with a friend, classmate, teacher, librarian, or parent
☐ Other: ________________________________

7. Next time you check out a book, which 2 approaches do you think you will be most likely to use? (Be sure to check 2)

☐ Book trailers
☐ Seeing books on display in the library (on top of shelves, pictures in the hallway, etc.)
☐ The cover or appearance of the book
☐ Favorite genre, topic, or subject
☐ Author or series you are familiar with
☐ Book is based on a movie, TV show, or video game
☐ Discussion/conversation with a friend, classmate, teacher, librarian, or parent
☐ Other: ________________________________
APPENDIX B
PARENT LETTER

Students and Parents:

I am writing this letter to ask you for your help in completing a research project I am conducting as a requirement towards my Master’s degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the approaches that sixth graders take when selecting independent reading books. My intention is to develop suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students on book selection. My data will be gathered through a survey. This survey will just be a modified version of a book review that is already in place in the language arts classroom. Students will be asked to complete this survey, taking approximately 5 minutes. This is something that is already in place in the classroom, but the survey questions have been modified a bit. All students will be completing the modified survey, but only the data from those students who have given permission will be used in my research project. I will be gathering data from the surveys for a four week period. All data will remain confidential; no names will be used in my research paper and your consent forms will be sealed in the office until final grades have been posted. I would really appreciate your participation and would love to answer any questions you have. You will find two attached forms: a parent permission form and a child assent form. Please have both student and parent sign these forms if you will allow me to use your data as a part of my research (Parents will need to sign both forms). Signed letters should be returned to the office by March 3, 2017.

Thank you in advance,

Sara Fischer
sixth grade Language Arts
Discovery Team
sara.fischer@indianola.k12.ia.us
(515) 961-9530
APPENDIX C

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW
PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

Invitation to Participate: Your child has been invited to participate in a research project conducted through the University of Northern Iowa. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to allow your child to participate in this project. The following information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate.

Nature and Purpose: The purpose of my research is to explore the approaches that sixth graders take when selecting independent reading books. My intention is to develop suggestions for teachers and teacher librarians in advising students on book selection.

Explanation of Procedures: My data will be gathered through a survey. This survey will just be a modified version of a book review that is already in place in the language arts classroom. Students will be asked to complete this survey, taking approximately 5 minutes, each time they complete a book. This is something that is already in place in the classroom, but the survey questions have been modified a bit. All students will be completing the modified survey, but only the data from those students who have given permission will be used in my research project. I will be gathering data from the surveys for a four week period.

Discomfort and Risks: There are no foreseeable risks to participation.

Benefits: Participants will receive no direct benefit.

Confidentiality: All data will remain confidential; no names will be used in my research paper and your consent forms will be sealed in the office until final grades have been posted. The summarized findings with no identifying information may be published in an academic journal or presented at a scholarly conference.
**Right to Refuse or Withdraw:** Your child’s participation is completely voluntary. He or she is free to withdraw from participation at any time or to choose not to participate at all, and by doing so, your child will not be penalized.

**Questions:** If you have questions about the study you may contact me at (515) 961-9530 or my faculty advisor Dr. Karla Krueger at the Department of School Library Studies, University of Northern Iowa 319-273-7241. You can also contact the office of the Human Participants Coordinator, University of Northern Iowa, at 319-273-6148, for answers to questions about rights of research participants and the participant review process.

**Agreement:**

I am fully aware of the nature and extent of my child’s participation in this project as stated above and the possible risks arising from it. I hereby agree to allow my son/daughter to participate in this project. I have received a copy of this form.

__________________________________________  ____________________________
(Signature of parent/legal guardian) (Date)

__________________________________________
(Printed name of parent/legal guardian)

__________________________________________
(Printed name of child participant)

__________________________________________  ____________________________
(Signature of investigator) (Date)

__________________________________________
(Signature of instructor/advisor) (Date)
APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA HUMAN PARTICIPANTS REVIEW
INFORMED ASSENT FORM

Project Title: Book Selection Approaches and the Middle School Student

Name of Principal Investigator(s): Sara Fischer

__________________________
Name

I, ______________________, have been told that one of my parents/guardians has given his/her permission for me to participate in a project about how I select free reading books.

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I have been told that I can stop participating in this project at any time. If I choose to stop or decide that I don’t want to participate in this project at all, nothing bad will happen to me. My grade will not be affected in any way.

__________________________
Name

__________________________
Date