

Kids Read Project: Readers' Advisory for Children

A Literature Review

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“When you read a book as a child, it becomes a part of your identity in a way that no other reading in your whole life does.” (Kathleen Kelly, *You've Got Mail*)

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Readers' advisory for all ages is a priority for libraries. Library staff consider it a fundamental part of their work to guide patrons to books or other materials that they might enjoy. To help find material for an adult reader, a staff person might start a conversation about books, ask the customer to fill out a form, or talk about other kinds of books the reader has enjoyed. Readers' advisory (RA) for children, though, requires unique skills and approaches. When suggesting books to children, many factors must be taken into consideration beyond simply what kinds of books they are interested in reading.

Helping children choose books to read is an important task. Many people can be involved in this process besides children, including parents, teachers, librarians, and friends. In order to determine best practices, a literature review of the state of children's readers' advisory and adjacent educational topics was completed. For the purposes of this literature review, the focus is on public library readers' advisory to children with some input from other kinds of libraries and educational institution doing adjacent readers' advisory work. From the literature, the importance of helping children find books they enjoy is readily apparent. The emphasis on teaching children how to read is strong in educational circles. However, when it comes to readers' advisory for children in public libraries, little seems to have been published or presented in recent years to further movement or growth in children's RA. Factors like constant changes in technology, the continued call and need for more diverse books for children, and the increased visibility of book recommendations demand movement in this field for children and public libraries. The why and how of children's readers' advisory in public libraries needs further exploration.

Reading for Education

A fundamental difference between RA for children versus adults is that many children are still learning how to read or continually improving their reading skills. While many adults have room for growth in their reading skills, that specific educational window for children is unique and requires an understanding on the part of those preparing suggestions for children. A key piece of the learning how to read puzzle in education today is text complexity and readability formulas.

The ground for reading instruction best practices is well trod (Pressley 2005). Experts have researched how best to teach children how to read and then move to reading to learn. In that research, themes appear that apply to helping children find the just-right book for them. They discuss the importance of appeal, of interest, of just-right book, but all in terms of learning. However in the discussion of these ideas the connection to pleasure reading is not fully explored. The literature on text analysis implies the importance of motivation and enjoyment on the part of the child reader

With this primary purpose of pleasure reading in mind, though, a basic knowledge of text readability and its impact on children's reading choices lays a good foundation for children's readers' advisory in the library. The history and current state of readability formulas in education inform good book suggestions for children. Understanding these formulas and how they are often used in schools can help public library staff engage in conversation with parents about difficulty levels in books at the library.

Readability formulas began in the early 20th century with the goal of helping students with different levels of educational need (Mesmer 2008, 13-14). Essentially, a readability

formula functions as a simple shortcut to determine a book's difficulty without reading the entire book. The use of such formulas is not intended as the sole defining characteristic of a child's reading and is simply one tool to help children in their reading and education.

"First generation" formulas take a 150-400 word sample representative of the text from a book. Next, these formulas apply a mathematical calculation that takes into consideration word length and word difficulty. That calculation is turned into a grade level approximation that is assigned to the book. Each formula calculates this grade level outcome differently based on multiple factors (Mesmer 2008, 15-17). Of these first generation formulas, some perform in better or worse ways for certain kinds of books or grade levels. For example, some formulas work best on books written for upper elementary students, while other formulas are most accurate when applied to early elementary. Each has its advantages and disadvantages depending on the needs of the child in question.

"Second generation" formulas for gauging text complexity and matching readers to books include systems like Lexile (Mesmer 2008, 44-45). While these systems function similarly to first generation formulas, they have key differences. For example, first generation formulas tie their scores to grade levels, but Lexile has its own system of measurement. Using a unique unit of measure allows for greater precision in assigning a level to a book, but users unfamiliar with the system may not understand what certain Lexile numbers would indicate. These and other technological improvements have led to some schools adopting these kinds of systems (62).

Other popular systems in use by schools today related to text complexity and often cited by parents and students include hybrid programs such as Accelerated Reader and Reading Counts (Mesmer 2008, 153-163). These kinds of systems purport to match young readers with

books using reading formulas alongside the added component of quizzes over each the material of each book. While these programs are becoming more common in schools, they are less relevant to the public library readers' advisory process for children because the public library will not offer any kind of quiz or test to young readers.

Beyond reading level assessment, the literature indicates that educators understand that student choice in what they read is important (Moley, Bandré, and George 2011, Jang et al. 2015, Weber 2018, Merga 2017). How that student choice is encouraged and mediated differs depending on students' ages and settings. Learning how to choose what books to read is an important skill for a child and can be addressed in a classroom alongside reading instruction and level assessment.

Determining the reading level of a child is not the task of the public library. However, if the reading level of the child is known it is incumbent on public library staff giving book recommendations to consider that reading level. Knowing this number or level will aid the recommender in finding a general area of books to recommend at level and above level. This information should not limit the recommender but rather help focus the suggestions. If suggested books are too difficult for unmotivated young readers, it could discourage them from reading.

Reading for Pleasure

Reading in general will always bring about learning. Whether it is learning about the wider world, diving into a specific topic, or simply enjoying a good story, reading begets learning. But, what is the primary purpose for kids when it comes to book choice at the public library and for library staff to aid them in selection? The goal of children's readers' advisory in the public library is reading for enjoyment, for pleasure, for story, for delight.

Beyond their educational instruction and reading-level-appropriate texts, children want to read books they enjoy. Do they enjoy reading what adults recommend? That depends. Beach (2015) specifically asks this question and compares a librarian-curated book list and a child-curated book-list. The librarian-curated list was the American Library Association's (ALA) *Notable Children's Books* while the children's list was from the International Reading Association's *Children's Choices*.

The comparison of these two lists revealed a startlingly low overlap in titles. Whereas the researchers posited that they should reasonably expect 50% overlap, the actual number was 4.36% (Beach 2015, 24). With 2,024 titles on the lists curated by adults and 3,385 on the child-curated lists, only 236 titles overlapped on both lists. The children's list was filled with titles that are often traditionally considered by adults to be less than ideal choices for children with types of books like "series books, joke books, comedies, and adventure stories" (19). Children often enjoy these kinds of simple and silly books while adults may want children to challenge themselves in their reading.

Books on the ALA list tended toward handling issues of interest to adults (Beach 2015, 32). Further, Beach found that more titles on the children's list tended toward positive as opposed to the difficult topics found on the ALA list. He suggested that perhaps suggestions for children should take in to consideration the preference of children for more positive reading selections. Overall, the interests of children should be taken into account when making suggestions on what they should read next.

While the lists compared in Beach's study did not have much overlap, lists compiled by adults are not necessarily off the table for helping children find appropriate and interesting titles.

Bang-Jensen (2010) explored the responses of students to a Vermont state book list where adults nominate titles and children choose their favorites from that curated list. The children studied in this instance had a positive response to choosing from this list, especially in that they preferred choosing from the list to choosing from a selection of books specifically for their reading levels. Further, the children in this study discussed being able to learn about their own interests in different genres and types of books, seemingly developing a vocabulary about their likes and dislikes by virtue of the opportunity of making their own choices. The study concluded that the adult curated list gave children a variety of options and that making their own choices from that list “[the children] exercise agency in the development of their own reader identities and create a rich relationship with books.” (175). The combined forces of adult input with the ability of children to choose their preferences seem to have a positive effect on reading interest.

Outside of librarian or teacher guided lists, parents are often a source of book recommendations for children. Many parents have acknowledged the value of reading together or of encouraging reading at home. Parents are writing books encouraging their fellow parents in how to find the right books for their children (Dodson 2014, Mackenzie 2018, Martin 2016). Some, like Mackenzie, have extended online networks including a website and podcasts to continue the conversation. Their works offer inspiration for librarians looking for books and demonstrate the desire of many parents to aid their children in discovering a love of reading.

The importance of reading books just for the enjoyment of reading is essential for young children. When addressing that importance of pleasure reading for young readers, Johnson and Giorgis (2002, 780) say,

Even with a teacher's caring guidance and a parent's well-intended recommendation, children turn to books that reflect their interests and capture their emotions. Time to read books of their own choosing, for their own purposes, and without having to prove that

comprehension has occurred remains significant in the ongoing development of independent readers. Satisfaction comes when readers investigate intriguing topics and participate as sleuths in mysterious storylines. A willingness to get lost in a book occurs when readers discover characters--some new, some known--caught up in dangerous, imaginative, or hilarious situations. And pleasure reading turns into sheer enjoyment when readers discover books that support their creative abilities and tickle their funny bones.

Pleasure reading helps children grow in confidence in their own reading skills, their interests, and their personalities. They discover what they enjoy and in turn use that to further their own learning.

As Beach (2015) posited, perennial favorites of children are not necessarily what adults would consider the cream of the reading and literature crop. Yet, it is not the choices of adults that matter when it comes to encouraging children in reading. Children's choices about books should be respected. A motivated reader will continue to read and may eventually graduate to other books. What adult reader does not have a comfort read or favorite cozy genre? Are adult readers required to only read what is considered good or educational. Just as with adults, every book recommendation for a child does not have to be suggested for the specific purpose of learning. When children read books they enjoy, they become motivated readers who are learning.

Reading for Growth

After reading for education and pleasure are considered, the importance of reading for growth cannot be underestimated. Combining the values of education and pleasure to create growth is evident in the literature. A book about an important topic does not have to be uninteresting or unappealing to a child. Books for growth can still be books that children enjoy.

Often referenced in this context is Bishop's (1990) theory on mirrors, windows, and sliding door. This theory posits when a child reads a book, they have the opportunity to see a

mirror of themselves, open a window to view another world different than their own, or find a sliding glass door to enter into the experience of another world. One of her main concerns as part of this theory is how non-white children often do not have mirrors in the books available to them. This concern resonates today, even with changes encouraged by movements like We Need Diverse Books. It is not a special corner of readers' advisory to make sure all children have access to stories about themselves or others. Reading widely and diversely is essential for all children and gives them opportunities to grow.

Many scholars build on the ideas behind windows and doors to explore those areas of children's literature that has not always received sufficient attention. While books about "special populations" are not the only avenues for reading for growth, acknowledging the importance of these stories can amplify voices that have not been well-represented. Some examples of these sometimes under-amplified texts include immigrant stories (Khaliova 2018), urban literature (Flemming 2014), and books centering LGBTQ characters and narratives (Dorr and Deskins 2018). When stories about a wide diversity of topics, characters and narratives, are available, the problem of a single story or stereotype diminishes (Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknow 2014). More children will be able to see themselves and the lives of others through reading. These books that have sometimes been classified in separate categories from "regular suggestions" should be recommended to any reader.

How to Recommend

It is clear that many factors should be taken into account when recommending books to children. These include a child's reading level, interest, motivation, and more. What does the literature say about how to make those suggestions that children will be excited to read?

General

A primary work on readers' advisory for young readers (Peck 2010) clearly lays out guidelines and best practices for conversations with children that help uncover good book suggestions. Peck (2010) suggests both informational and topical questions, like asking a young reader what grade they are in, who their favorite author is, and what their hobbies are, to get a picture of what books they might be interested in reading next. As part of or after the conversation, there are many avenues for discovering books to recommend, including looking at prepared lists, search the catalog or databases, or even browsing the shelf to see what is clearly available (1-13). Overall, these kinds of interactions should be positive and encouraging with the goal of helping a young reader find a book to enjoy.

Another useful framework from Peck is the delineation of the general types of books that can be good suggestions for different ages. Emergent readers, often ages five and six, are typically ready for leveled "reader" books typically found in a beginning or easy reader section (33-43). These kinds of books are written especially to facilitate learning how to read. Children often enjoy finding reader books on topics they especially enjoy, such as favorite animals or sports.

For six to eight year olds who are transitioning to becoming proficient and fluent readers, Peck recommends "transitional" books which bridge a child from readers to solid chapter books (59-72). These transitional books often have shorter chapters and are parts of a series, such as Captain Underpants or Junie B. Jones. By encouraging transitional books for this group, librarians can help build the confidence and interest of young readers.

Peck defines “tweens,” her next level of reader, as between the ages of 9 and 12 and from fourth to seventh grade (77-88). Her recommendations for this age of presumably fluent and competent readers tended to genre fiction, such as fantasy, mystery, or adventure. Because there are so many books published and available to this age the options for this age group are endless based on their own interests and the librarian’s ability to seek out a wide range of books to recommend.

School Library and Educational Perspective

Another way for young children to become skilled at talking about books and participating in the readers’ advisory conversations is through the teaching of appeal terms. One school librarian (Nesi 2010) spent two years teaching her students how to have conversations about books after realizing many of them simply used the word “interesting” to describe what they were looking for in books. Using the work of Sarick (2005), Nesi created a form called “Book Hooks” where students learned to talk about books they enjoyed with words that described what was appealing about the book, or “appeal terms.” These forms were housed in a binder that students could access so that students could see what other students liked about the books they were reading. Nesi said that while the project was time-consuming, she saw results through a dramatic increase in circulation and improved conversations and interactions with her students (42).

Another school librarian (Weber 2018) created a program to help her students choose books at the school library to read on their own. She and other teachers had noticed that many students struggled to make a choice of what to read with limited time in the school library. Weber created forms for children to use in conjunction with the school’s online catalog prior to

their library. The children searched for books in the online catalog, made a selection with the help of genre and author searches, and wrote down all of the information on the form that would help them find the book in the library. A teacher then approved the selections to guide the students in the process. Students could then find their books during their library visit (7). The analysis of this experimental program indicated that such a guided system helped students make statistically significant gains in their reading scores. Further, students reported that this process helped them gain confidence in book selection (11-12). This guided process demonstrates the value of adult input in helping children select books.

Merga (2018) echoes the findings of Nesi and Weber in their specific settings. From her research with school-age children, she says, “Educators, parents, and librarians need to know, as far as possible, their students, children, and clients’ preferences, skill level, and preferred levels of challenge. Children need to be explicitly taught choosing strategies, and have the kinds of books they enjoy available to them.... (220). Putting children’s interests first can help those children to be able to find books that they enjoy and thus perhaps enjoy reading more often.

For both Nesi and Weber at school libraries, instruction in appeal terms and use of guided forms is a possibility. However, a public library does not have the same kind of instructional access to children. Staff need to be trained to learn basic characteristics of children’s books and interpret kid speak in order to make accurate recommendations. Public library staff are a support to children’s reading choices, but they do not in any way approve or limit their choices.

Categories

One emergent theme in the literature for children’s RA is the need for broad categories when it comes to describing and classifying children’s books for the purposes of

recommendation. When suggesting books, recommenders often group their choices for children in larger categories (Johnson 2001, Johnson 2002, Harris 2008, Schulze 2017). This practice forms convenient groupings that help place children's reading interests and preferences. Children are not tied to only one category but can use any grouping to find new material to enjoy. Categories help children to be able to identify the books they are interested in and it helps adults guide children to books they might enjoy.

One key way to help match children with titles is to use broad categories to narrow down suggestions. Categorization is a valuable tool for any project, but it is especially valuable for the young reader. Children are learning how to make sense of the world around them. Learning, then, about about types, genres, and styles of books gives them a framework for how to choose what to read next.

Form-based Readers' Advisory

Little can be found about form-based readers' advisory in the search of both scholarly databases and prominent library publications such as *American Libraries Magazine* and *Library Journal*. The only published example of any form-based tools for children was Nesi's (2010) school library setting use of a form to teach her students about readers' advisory but not to provide suggestions. It can be presumed that other libraries in the United States are using this kind of service from the few mentions that can be found (Dankowski June 2016, Dankowski September 2016, Sievert et al. 2018) and a training by Rebecca Howard and Laura Raphael that was offered by the ALA (2013). A survey from *Novelist* and *Library Journal* (Schwartz and Thornton-Verma 2014) queried 18,000 libraries and received responses from 694 public libraries about readers' advisory services. This survey found that while 97% of those libraries provided

RA for adults, only 59% of the libraries did any kind of RA for children. 19% of libraries surveyed used form-based RA for their customers, but the age group was not specified. Beyond these statistics, the published information about these kinds of programs for adults is slim and nonexistent for children.

TCCL has had success with form-based readers' advisory for adults (Howard and Raphael 2012) and teens. In these services, interested adults and teens fill out an online form about their reading interests. Library staff reviews each form and creates a individual personalized reading guide for each submission. As with adults, it can be difficult to match librarian's availability with a young reader's visit to the library. This is where form-based readers' advisory as done for adults and teens at the Tulsa City-County Library could be effective for making suggestions for children. Staff creating these recommendation guides for children need to have adequate training and preparation. This could include experience in the field and/or dedicated readers' advisory training which takes into account the special situations inherent in children's readers' advisory as outlined in this literature review.

Conclusion

Many factors affect children's enjoyment of reading. A public library has an important part to play in supporting and encouraging that enjoyment through readers' advisory for children. By incorporating ideas from both education and librarianship, public library staff serving children have the opportunity to help children find good books to read and learn how to make their own book choices in the future. In so doing, it is hoped to grow both lifelong readers and lifelong library users.

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