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Literature Review: Organizational Factors that Influence Book Selection among Children

LIBR 285 with Dr. Chris Hagar

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Many scholars and professional librarians have written on the topic of book organization in public and school libraries. Some have critically examined the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system (Casey & Stephens, 2009; Sullivan, 2010). Others have critiqued alternate systems, for instance the Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) subject-based classification system typically used in bookstores (Fister, 2009). And some have looked specifically at how children use classification systems (Stauffer, 2008). But few researchers have examined how book organization in the library influences a child’s decision on what to read, particularly in the area of fiction. In fact, this literature review found little evidence that the topic has been analyzed in recent studies.

To establish what has been studied on the link between children’s book selection and book organization in public and school libraries, the author of this paper pulled literature from related topics, including discussions about DDC usage, essays on the successes and limitations of alternate classification systems, and two recent studies that examined how children choose fiction books in a library setting.

However, the literature does not address the research question of this proposal: Does reorganizing fiction books, from an author-alphabetized system into a genre-based classification system, influence the way children choose books in a K-5 school library? Nor does the literature begin to address subsequent questions: How do children browse fiction titles that are organized by genre? And, does this type of organization help children locate books they want to read? The following literature review examines what has been written on these related topics and identifies gaps in the literature that this proposal intends to address.
Dewey Debate

While Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) is predominantly used to classify non-fiction titles, with fiction typically arranged alphabetically and/or by reading level, a small movement among some libraries to reject DDC in favor of a reader-interest organization, particularly in children’s collections, warrants examination (Boyce & Boyce, 2002). And while this debate is only peripheral to the proposed topic of this research, the timely discussion illuminates the bigger research problem of patron dissatisfaction with libraries due to patrons’ inability to find books they want to check out (Lynch & Mulero, 2007).

Some scholars anticipate that a new system, better at supporting browsing, will ultimately replace DDC, particularly in school libraries (Harris, 2009). Michael Casey and Michael Stephens (2009) write: “[Dewey] is simply not suited to a popular collection intended more for browsing than research” (p. 2). They argue that moving toward a reader-interest classification improves the ability of patrons to find books. Because young children, as noted in a study of children between the ages of 7 and 12, primarily look for books by browsing (Raqi & Zainab, 2008), it seems only logical that increasing a collection’s browsability, using a subject or genre based organization, will benefit readers in this age group. Casey and Stephens (2009), however, do not point to research that supports this theory.

Three case studies, however, do support this theory. In her essay, “The Dewey Dilemma,” librarian Barbara Fister (2009) discusses various denouncements of and modifications to DDC initiated by libraries around the country, including the libraries in Maricopa County, Arizona, which announced their Dewey-free status in 2007. Fister highlights, in particular, the changes undertaken in children’s services at the Darien Public Library, in Connecticut. There, librarians replaced DDC with a hybrid classification system based on a
book’s age recommendation and subject matter. As a result, circulation in the children’s section increased 30% (Fister, 2009). In another example at the Southlake Public Library, in Texas, circulation stats increased over 200% in the three years following the implementation of a Dewey-free classification system (McGreath & Tucker, 2008). A third case involves the school libraries in the Hamilton-Wentworth School District, in Ontario. When librarians scrapped DDC for a student-designed, subject-based system, librarians saw an increase in circulation, improvements in student reshelving efforts, positive feedback from students and teachers, and interest in the system from other schools (Gibson, 2011).

All three cases, however, rely solely upon circulation statistics. To provide meaningful data, the libraries would need to analyze a greater range of circulation statistics from a variety of libraries (not just their own) and supplement the data with user satisfaction surveys and/or observational studies. For instance, in the case of the Darien Public Library, a study would need to look at whether the books’ reclassification by reading level or subject matter (or both) had an impact on the increase in circulation. Finally, it is worth noting that some librarians believe the real problem isn’t with the classification system, but rather that children aren’t sufficiently taught how to use it (Haeffner, 2005). Others argue that better signage or book labels would boost circulation rates just the same (Hassett, 2007).

**Promising Implications for Genre-Based Organization of Fiction**

The literature indicates that many libraries have adopted some type of genre-classification in their fiction titles, either by arranging their books by theme or by using genre-identifying spine labels on books arranged alphabetically by author’s last name. In one 1993 survey, 41% of participating libraries reported use of genre classification in their adult and juvenile collections (Boyce & Boyce, 2002). Interestingly, in reports looking at a range of
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circulation statistics over time, another research team found a circulation increase of 36% for fiction titles arranged by genre, compared to a 10% increase in libraries similar in patron usage and size, where the fiction was arranged by author’s last name (Boyce & Boyce, 2002). In her book *Readers’ Advisory for Children and ‘Tweens*, author and librarian Penny Peck (2012) affirms the trend: “Many libraries put stickers indicating the genres on the spines of their juvenile fiction books. These can help staff and patrons find books they might like” (p. 83).

When middle school librarian Laura Stiles (2004) sorted her fiction titles into 15 genre categories and labeled them with iconic stickers, she reported: “Now there’s a large contingent of ‘non-readers’ who stop by the library to find ‘their’ kind of books,” (p. 2). Unfortunately, Stiles’ results have not been quantified or analyzed in empirical research, which would help isolate factors that may have led to an increase in patronage. Without surveys and controlled observations of children selecting books, it is not appropriate to assume that the new genre organization alone increased usage (or circulation for that matter). For instance, did the process of analyzing and labeling all the fiction titles better inform Stiles of her collection and therefore lead to better book recommendations? And could that have influenced the statistics more than the simple rearrangement of books?

Another researcher, Kerri Huff (2006), investigated attitudes toward genre fiction classification among patrons at a public library in Durham County, North Carolina, which had recently undergone a switch from an author-organized to a genre-based classification system. Using 72 survey responses and circulation data collected four and five years following the change, Huff found that 61% of patrons found the library’s genre-classified fiction section highly satisfactory with 44% of patrons seeking books by genre. (In contrast, 33% sought books by author’s name and 7% by book title.) Overall, Huff’s study indicated positive results of genre
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classification over time and serves as a model for this author’s proposed study, which will, in contrast, target at much younger audience with different book selection skills and behavior.

Children’s Book Selection

Finally, several studies have looked at factors that influence children’s selection of fiction books, independently noting that the most influential factor has to do with the book’s subject matter, or topic. The research indicates, for instance, that scary stories, graphic novels, sports-themed books, animal-themed books, humor books, and series titles consistently top the list as genre favorites among school age kids (Swartz & Hendricks, 2000).

Raqi and Zainab’s (2008) observational study of book selection strategies of Malaysian children, ages of 7 to 12, determined that shelf browsing was the most popular strategy for locating books and, overall, children preferred reading mystery and adventure books, with the exception of younger children (ages 7 to 9), who showed less of a genre preference in general. The results of this study, which included structured interviews of participants, indicate two important findings in relation to this research proposal: a) the organization and display of books on the shelves is important since children tend to find books by browsing, and b) a genre-classification of books may appeal more to children older than 9 years. While this study does indicate some positive steps librarians can take toward improving the book selection success of children in public libraries, there is room for additional studies involving children in the school library setting, where school curriculum and the close social relationships among patrons that may cause one student to influence another student’s interest in a certain genre of book or section of the school library may play a significant role in what students chose to read.

A second recent study examined the physical actions of children selecting books in a public library. Through observations and interviews of 7 to 9 year olds, researcher Kara Reuter
(2008) identified various strategies children used to select books, such as looking at the cover illustration or reading the title and back blurb. Reuter also identified such sophisticated strategies as reading inside pages to get a sense of the writer’s style. Her interviews found that all participating subjects denied having had formal instruction on the process of selecting books and relied on instinct or watching others. Reuter’s findings indicate that an important factor relating to children’s book selection behavior is whether the child has received instruction on the process, particularly instruction on identifying a book’s genre.

In summary, the connection between book organization and book selection in the fiction sections of children’s libraries is scant, at best. While much has been written on children’s use of DDC and alternate classification systems, there is little consensus on what type of system best serves children’s needs, particularly in regard to their selection of fiction. As suggested in this proposal, a qualitative study of children in a K-5 school library that has recently undergone a change from author-alphabetized to genre-classified fiction, presents an opportunity to examine children’s book searching strategies following such a reorganization. The resulting study would add to the body of literature that contributes to the study of children’s book searching strategies and behavior, aiming to improve services and offer researched guidelines for libraries interested in undertaking a similar change in their collection.
References


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Julia,

This is an excellent review. You gave a very comprehensive coverage of the literature and summarized and synthesized the arguments well; it is a fascinating study. I am looking forward to reading your final proposal.

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