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Informational Books, Beginning Readers, and the Importance of Display: The Role of the Public Library

Les livres d'information, les lecteurs débutants, et l'importance de la présentation : le rôle de la bibliothèque publique

Patricia A. Larkin-Lieffers

Abstract: Public venues providing books for young children (stores, daycares, preschools, out-of-school cares, classrooms, and libraries) in a Canadian median-household-income neighbourhood were visited to determine the balance of stories and informational books for beginning readers ages 4 to 8, placed on display. Stories were heavily favoured in almost all venues; 86% of books on display were stories and 14% were informational books. Few children would likely find a broad range of informational topics. The public library has an opportunity to display a balance of genres to support beginning readers' informational as well as fictional needs and interests.

Keywords: informational books, non-fiction, beginning readers, public library, displays

Résumé : Les sites publics (magasins, garderies, garderies en dehors de l'école, maternelles, classes d'école, bibliothèques) d'un quartier de ménages canadiens à revenu moyen mettant des livres à la disposition des jeunes enfants ont fait l'objet d'une visite afin de déterminer la proportion de livres de fiction et de livres d'information présentés aux lecteurs débutants, d'âge compris entre 4 et 8 ans. Dans presque tous les sites, c'est la fiction qui a été fortement privilégiée ; dans le quartier considéré, la proportion des livres présentés a été de 86 pour cent pour les livres de fiction contre 14 pour cent pour les livres d'information. Peu d'enfants seraient en mesure de trouver un large éventail de sujets d'information. Les bibliothèques publiques ont la possibilité de proposer une présentation équilibrée entre les genres afin de répondre aux besoins et aux intérêts des lecteurs débutants en information comme en fiction.

Mots-clés : livres d'information, non-fiction, lecteurs débutants, bibliothèque publique, affichage

Introduction

Informational books play a very important role as part of the set of books published for young children. The wide selection of readable, attractively illustrated, and topical non-fiction materials complements the many stories written for this age group. Stories have traditionally been seen as more appropriate for learning

to read (Mantzicopoulos and Patrick 2010; Palmer and Stewart 2003; Pappas 1991, 1993), and it was also believed that children preferred them (Pappas 1991, 1993). Recent research in education, however, has stressed the value of providing informational books as well, for both formal educational and recreational reading. Children who enjoy reading informational books along with stories become more versatile readers (Duke 2000, 2004; Palmer and Stewart 2003; Pappas 1991, 1993; Yopp and Yopp 2000), increase their content vocabulary and familiarity with expository texts for upper-grade assignments in social studies and science (Duke 2000; Palmer and Stewart 2003), and may learn the specific language structures of scientific writing (Moss 2008; Norris et al. 2008; Pappas 2006; Smith et al. 2006). Reluctant and struggling readers often prefer informational books for the facts they offer, and their interest in the topic may be a strong motivator for persevering in learning to read (Caswell and Duke 1998; Dreher 2003; Fink 1995). For these children, the shorter discrete paragraphs and plentiful photographs may also be more manageable than a narrative plot line and character development (Dayton-Sakari and Jobe 2003; Giblin 2000; McKechnie 2006; Mohr 2006). Many young children simply enjoy informational books for the opportunities to find answers to the many questions they have about the world around them. For any child, a broad selection of both stories and informational books provides opportunities to find books that are appealing for their topic, genre, and skill level and that in turn support their interests and encourage reading (Doiron 2003; Krashen 2004).

Displays are a popular and time-tested way to introduce young readers to the range of stories and informational books available to them in libraries, retail stores, and other neighbourhood locations. Young children's short attention spans, beginning reading skills, limited searching abilities (Shenton and Dixon 2004), and hesitation to explore widely in the children's areas of libraries (Larkin-Lieffers 2001) can make finding materials a frustrating and sometimes unsuccessful experience. Displays can address these limitations. Aschenbeck's study (2009) of kindergarteners' choices of books in a school library showed that circulation increased when attractive, well-designed, and themed displays were added. Dalton (1991) noted that books on display in a school media centre were preferentially chosen, and that children will take a familiar book out of the stacks but may try new books if they are displayed. Watson, Clayburn, and Snider (1985) found that displays with posters were effective in increasing circulation, especially for young children. Displays can also introduce parents, who often make reading choices for their children, to the various genres and formats available to them. In a study of purchases of children's books in Canadian bookstores (Canadian Publishers' Council 1999), books were bought for gifts 75% of the time, and books in displays and face-front shelf presentations accounted for 70% of purchases.

Purpose of the study

Given the value of a broad selection of both stories and informational books for beginning readers and the usefulness of displays in highlighting the available selection, the aim of this study, as part of a larger study on the accessibility of

informational books for beginning readers in a median-household-income neighbourhood, was to investigate the balance of age-appropriate stories and informational books displayed in the various public neighbourhood locations where young children can find books to read. This approach recognizes that the neighbourhood, as the public setting where most day-to-day activities occur, is a place that shapes children's experiences through its amenities or limitations, and that an understanding of children's early literacy development must include a sense of what their immediate surroundings afford in the way of reading opportunities (Ellis 2002; Neuman and Celano 2001).

The research question was, What can beginning readers ages 4 to 8 and their parents find in the displays in the various stores, daycares, preschools, out-of-school cares, schools, and libraries that provide age appropriate books in a median-household-income neighbourhood? The implications of the findings for beginning readers and thus for the role of the public library in providing books for them are presented.

Design of the study

Definitions

Displays are arrangements of books that have been taken from their usual location and placed in prominent positions to highlight them.

Young children or *beginning readers* are children ages 4 to 8 years.

Story books or *stories* are fiction books in picture book format; they are sometimes called picture story books. *Fictional levelled readers* are included under this definition, but early chapter books, which are mostly text, are excluded. Story books accompanied by cassettes are included. For this study, only English-language books were included.

Informational books are books whose main aim is to inform or to present facts. For this study this definition refers to books in a picture book format or books with many illustrations as opposed to those that are mostly text. This definition includes *information fact books*, which present facts in expository text; *narrative informational books*, which present facts in a narrative format (e.g., life cycles and animal behaviour); *informational story books*, which present facts in a fictional or fantasy format; *concept books*, which present simple concepts such as letters, numbers, opposites, and colours; *photo-documentaries* or *photo-essays*; *experiment books*; *activity books*; *arts and crafts books*; *biographies*; *informational levelled readers*; *reference books*; *music books*; *poetry informational books*; *question and answer books*; *field guides*; *manuals*; *joke and games books*; and other sub-genres. Only English-language books were included.

Neighbourhood is an urban area that includes residential housing; a public library; at least one elementary school; several daycares, preschools, and out-of-school cares; and major shopping areas. It is the area where families conduct most of their day-to-day living within a reasonable distance from their homes, and therefore is the setting or place that supports the reading activities of the young children who live there.

Median household income refers to provincial and city values of median income for all private households based on Statistics Canada 2006 census data (Statistics Canada 2009).

The publishing supply of available books

To provide some comparison figures for the balance of genres in the displays, *Bowker's Global Books in Print* (R. R. Bowker 2012) was consulted for the numbers of fiction and non-fiction books for children ages 4 to 8 in the Canadian market in 2009, the year of the beginning of this study. There were 6,526 fiction books and 5,523 non-fiction books in print; thus, stories made up 54% and informational books 46% of the available books for this age group.

Selection of the study neighbourhood

Statistics Canada 2006 census data (Statistics Canada 2009) was consulted to locate a census tract with a public library in a western Canadian city that conformed to provincial and city median-household-income values. To ensure that there would be a reasonable demand for English-language children's books, the tract also contained the same proportion as the overall city and province of children and of people who speak English at home. Since census tracts are relatively small in area, the neighbourhood was extended to an area equal to a circle with a radius of 1.5 kilometres from the centre of the census tract. Such an area would include a variety of daycares, preschools, out-of-school cares, elementary schools, and retail stores that would be within reasonable walking distance or a short driving distance. This area overlapped more census tracts, so the criteria census values for these tracts were noted to ensure that the study neighbourhood did not deviate too widely from the provincial and city values.

Within the study neighbourhood, 15 stores that sold children's books were located. The following 12 stores agreed to participate: two chain department-type stores, a chain department-and-grocery store, a chain grocery store, a chain toy store, a chain off-price clothing store, a chain off-price home decor store, a chain dollar-type store, a chain educational store, an independent book-and-gift store, an independent nature store, and a chain mall bookstore. Due to a conflict of interest with one of the chain grocery stores in the area, it was replaced with another store of the same chain in a nearby neighbourhood, bringing the total to 13 venues. Five other stores near, but outside, the study area that are popular shopping destinations for books and general merchandise were approached to give a more comprehensive picture of display selections. All five—a chain warehouse-club store, a local chain used bookstore, an independent bookstore, a chain big-box bookstore, and a chain supercentre—agreed to participate. Six daycares and out-of-school cares that did not have specialized programs, such as second-language instruction, that might affect the selection of books in their displays were identified in the neighbourhood; two daycares, a care centre with a daycare room and an out-of-school care room (which counted as two venues), and two out-of-school cares agreed to participate. The two preschools within the study area that met the same requirement were contacted and agreed to

participate. To augment the sample, a preschool just outside the study area but in one of the study census tracts was contacted. The teacher there also agreed to participate. The three public elementary schools in the study neighbourhood that offered regular English programming as their main focus were approached; one agreed to allow the school library to participate. As classrooms were to be included in the study, two schools just outside the study neighbourhood and whose main focus was regular English programming were approached; one agreed to participate, so its library, a kindergarten classroom, and a Grade 1 classroom were added to the study group. A school book fair was also included. The local public library, a busy suburban branch with a large children's area, agreed to participate. The total number of venues in the study was 33.

The tally of the books in the displays

For the larger study on accessibility of age-appropriate informational books, all the books in each venue were counted, but for this article the focus is on the books on display. Face-front shelving apart from the main shelving, tables, counters, and the tops of shelves were the most popular methods of displaying books. The tally was recorded by hand as computers were not welcome in many of the venues, particularly the retail stores.

To determine if the informational books were aimed at 4- to 8-year-olds, the title and ISBN of each book that was deemed to be age appropriate or for a slightly older cohort was recorded. Later, the publisher's age range for each book was checked on the publishers' websites. Since there is no standardization of recommendation across all publishers, the general rules that are listed in the appendix were used. If the information was not available from the publishers, reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Horn Book*, *Children's Literature*, *Resource Links*, *CM*, and *Publishers Weekly* were consulted. For those few books that were not listed in these sources, the Vancouver Public Library's catalogue was consulted to see if the books were included in the "Juvenile Non-fiction Easy" category, which is aimed at ages 4 to 8. If the book was not listed in any of these resources, its inclusion was determined according to the author's personal experience with these other guides. The topic of each informational book was also noted.

Given the large numbers of story books in the displays, the methods used to determine age appropriateness of the informational books were impractical for use on story books. Picture story books are generally aimed at this age group; however, to ensure accuracy, the titles and ISBNs of a sample of 50 story books that were deemed to be age appropriate (with no duplication of authors or series) were recorded from several stores. They were checked against publishers' websites according to the rules listed in the appendix. The in-store assessments were accurate 96% of the time. Counts of story books were thus done using the author's discretion as to age appropriateness.

Counts for each retail venue were conducted in the fall and a few more venues were added the following spring. These times were chosen to avoid the start of school and the Christmas season, which might have skewed selections of

books. Counts in the other locations were conducted at times that did not coincide with any major holiday. To tally the greatest selection, the counts were done in the morning—before the books had been picked over—whenever possible. There were no duplicates of titles in the displays in any of the daycares, preschools, out-of-school cares, classrooms, and libraries. In the individual retail stores and at the book fair, there was some duplication of both story and informational book titles.

Interviews of staff in the venues

The larger study included interviews with some of the participants in the venues on a range of topics related to their collections; relevant comments about displays are included in the findings.

The findings: What was in the displays

The findings in the groups of venues are described, and a summary of the data is then presented in [tables 1](#) and [2](#). In most venues the preponderance of story books over informational books was overwhelming.

Retail stores and book fair

Displays were used to showcase books at 7 of the 18 retail stores and at the book fair. National chain bookstores are the largest source of children’s books for shoppers in Canada ([Canadian Publishers’ Council 2005](#)); the two in this study presented a total of 183 stories and 1 informational book on concepts in displays. The independent bookstore, which also carried a wide array of books for young children, displayed 261 stories (95% of the books on display) and 14 informational books (5%). The store had teachers and homeschoolers as some of their clientele, and the nine topics presented in the informational books tended toward curricular subjects such as geography and cultures, weather, animals, and plants and trees. The local chain used bookstore and the chain toy store displayed only stories. The independent book-and-gift store and the independent

Table 1: Proportions of stories and informational books on display in the neighbourhood venues

Neighbourhood venue group	Venues	Venues with displays	Books on display	Stories on display (% of total)	Informational books on display (% of total)	Topics in each venue
Retail stores	18	7	647	626 (97)	21 (3)	0, 0, 0, 1, 3, 3, 9
Book fair	1	1	51	42 (82)	9 (18)	3
Daycares	3	3	186	168 (90)	18 (10)	1, 1, 8
Preschools	3	3	123	76 (62)	47 (38)	3, 4, 6
Out-of-school cares	3	1	37	30 (81)	7 (19)	5
School classrooms	2	2	354	259 (73)	95 (27)	8, 14
School libraries	2	1	46	41 (89)	5 (11)	5
Public library	1	1	191	171 (90)	20 (10)	10
Totals	33	19	1635	1413 (86)	222 (14)	30

Table 2: Topics of informational books on display in the neighbourhood venues

Topic	Books in neighbourhood displays	Per cent of total	Venues providing book(s) on topic
Animals	59	27	11
Concepts	43	19	12
Health	19	9	2
Geography and cultures	14	6	4
Dinosaurs and prehistoric animals	12	5	4
Reference	7	3	4
Environment and conservation	7	3	2
Life skills and family	6	3	5
Music	6	3	3
Space	5	2	3
Professions	5	2	2
Trucks, cars, and motorcycles	4	2	4
Biography	3	1	3
Nature	3	1	2
Plants and trees	3	1	2
Art	3	1	2
Sports	3	1	2
Food and cooking	3	1	1
Farm life	2	1	2
Physical geography and geology	2	1	2
Transportation	2	1	2
Arts and crafts	2	1	1
Weather	2	1	1
Jokes	1	<1	1
History	1	<1	1
Holidays and celebrations	1	<1	1
Mythology	1	<1	1
Faith	1	<1	1
Pets	1	<1	1
Seasons	1	<1	1
Totals	222	100	33

nature store favoured a more balanced selection of genres in their displays, but their share of the selection of books in the neighbourhood retail market was very small at about 1%. Displays were not used at the two chain department-type stores, the chain department-and-grocery store, the two chain grocery stores, the two chain off-price stores, the chain dollar-type store, the chain educational store, the chain warehouse-club store, and the chain supercentre.

The total number of books displayed in the retail stores was 647; of these, 626 (97%) were stories and 21 (3%) were informational books. Eleven informational topics were presented, of which animals, plants and trees, and geography and cultures were the most represented; others were concepts, environment and conservation, life skills and family, music, space, biography, art, and weather. The proportion of informational books on display at the book fair was higher at 18% but included only three topics: food and cooking, reference, and geography and cultures.

Retailers from three stores—a chain department-type store, the chain educational store, and the independent book-and-gift store—commented that, in their view, the informational books were less interesting than the stories. A staff member from the independent bookstore valued both genres but noted that parent customers bought mostly stories for this age group and that there was a perception that stories were the appropriate books for learning to read. Most books brought for resale to the used bookstore were stories, which was reflected in the store's inventory and displays.

Daycares

The two daycares tended to run their programs on themes, and the books provided in displays for the children each week were to some degree based on these themes. The daycare room of the day- and out-of-school care did not have an evident theme on the day of the tally. All three locations provided face-front displays. Two of the displays contained all stories except one or two informational books. The third provided eight topics, but these books accounted for only 11% of the books on display. The total display count for the three daycares was 168 stories (90%) and 18 informational books (10%). One-third of the informational books on display were concept books; other topics were professions, animals, dinosaurs and prehistoric animals, life skills and family, music, nature, farm life, and holidays and celebrations.

The daycare staff member who provided an interview felt that short stories were more appropriate than longer informational books for the time constraints of daycare schedules.

Preschools

The three preschools based their programs on themes, some of which were formal educational topics such as the alphabet or safety, and the face-front displays largely reflected the themes. The preschools had varying balances of stories and informational books on display. One preschool's teacher preferred stories, remarking that the children did not like informational books and became bored with them if the teacher read them aloud to the group; the few informational books in her display were not indicative of her preferences. The two teachers of the second preschool had many story-related themes, such as princesses and teddy bears, as well as some themes that could accommodate both genres. They felt that there were more story books than informational books that matched their chosen themes and also noted that most of the books donated by parents were stories. In comparison, the third preschool's teacher displayed a balanced assortment of genres; her display presented six informational topics, including the recreational topics of sports and trucks, cars, and motorcycles. She thought the children enjoyed and benefitted from opportunities with both genres. Among all the preschools, stories accounted for 62% of the selection and the informational books 38%; the informational books covered nine topics, of which animals and concepts were the most represented. Other topics included health; life skills and family; trucks, cars, and motorcycles; nature; sports; mythology; and seasons.

Out-of-school cares

Two of the out-of-school cares did not display books while the third offered 81% stories and 19% informational books. Many of the books were discards from the school library, and the informational books were therefore mostly curricular in content; topics included animals, art, concepts, physical geography and geology, and reference. The out-of-school-care staff declined to be interviewed.

School classrooms

The kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms had the most books on display and proportionally more informational books than the retail stores and daycares; stories accounted for 73% and informational books 27% of the displays.

Many of the informational books in both classrooms focused on the curricular topic at the time of the study. Most of the display books in the kindergarten craft-and-activity tables were about the week's theme of dinosaurs; concept books, which support much of the kindergarten curriculum, were well represented in the face-front display. The teacher felt that many of her students liked informational themes. A recent Grade 1 field trip to the zoo had prompted the teachers to highlight many animal books; the classroom also had the widest range of informational topics among the study venues, including one book each on the recreational topics of jokes and trucks, cars, and motorcycles. Books that the teachers had read to the class were also put on display for the children.

The Grade 1 teachers noted that stories were very important in their programs and were the first books used to teach reading; informational books were introduced for reading later in the year for research projects. They also commented that narratives were somewhat easier to read to the class. The school principal noted that in her opinion there was generally and historically a trend among teachers to prefer stories for reading aloud to this age group.

School libraries

One school library did not have displays at the time of the study, although a Christmas display made entirely of stories was set up after the study was completed. The second school library heavily favoured stories. Of the books on display, 41 (89%) were stories and 5 (11%) were age-appropriate informational books on the topics of animals, concepts, life skills and family, biography, and history. Both libraries had policies that somewhat restricted kindergarten and Grade 1 classes from choosing from the Dewey system-organized non-fiction collection in their regular visits to the library. Also, a library staff member mentioned that stories were more useful for learning to read. These policies may have influenced what the library staff put on display for this age group.

Public library

The public library provided face-front presentations of stories on top of the shelves of the picture story books; concept books in the adjoining shelves were also displayed this way. The other informational books were placed in individual

display platforms at the ends of the Dewey system—organized non-fiction shelving. In total, displays were 90% stories; at the time of the study, no theme determined the choice of informational books on display. Ten informational topics, including some recreational topics not found elsewhere, were presented; concept books, of which 11 were displayed, were by far the most popular. The other nine topics—animals; dinosaurs and prehistoric animals; trucks, cars, and motorcycles; biography; sports; farm life; transportation; pets; and faith—were represented by one book each.

The disparate selection of stories and informational books in the displays did not reflect the comments from the librarians supporting the value of both genres; however, the youth services librarian observed that parents gravitated to the story books or the levelled readers for reading materials for their children and that browsing usually happened around the story books. The few visits to the non-fiction were usually done with a specific interest in mind.

Summary of the findings

Stories were the heavily favoured choice in the neighbourhood displays. The overall composition of displays was 86% stories and 14% informational books. Stories were the heavily favoured choice in almost all the venues; only the independent nature store and one preschool came close to a balance of both genres. Stories were particularly popular in the daycares and two of the preschools that provide programs for the younger children in the study cohort. The education-focused kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms, one of the preschools, and an out-of-school care provided more informational books but most were for curricular subjects. Almost all of the books on display in the retail stores were stories. Data are presented in table 1.

Informational books covered 30 topics in the neighbourhood displays; animals and concept books were by far the most popular, respectively making up 27% and 19% of the selection and being available in 11 and 12 locations. Animals, concepts, health, geography and cultures, and dinosaurs and prehistoric animals made up two-thirds of all the available titles and therefore were the topics that children would most likely find. The remaining topics were scattered throughout the neighbourhood venues. Many recreational topics, such as hobbies, licensed characters, dance, computers, movies, and outdoor recreation were missing from all the venues. The school and public libraries had the largest and most comprehensive collections of non-fiction materials, but their displays did not reflect this selection. The public library provided 10 topics and the most recreational topics, but only the retail stores had a smaller proportion of informational books on display. Data are presented in table 2.

Three themes emerged from various participants' comments that were relevant to what is chosen for displays. First, stories were seen as generally more suited to young children by many venue staff and parents while informational books were perceived as less interesting or too long for this age group. Participants also usually preferred stories to read aloud as they likely thought it was easier to draw a group of children into a story than into an informational topic

that may only appeal to a few children. The books that had been read subsequently became components of the displays. The ease of reading a story may appeal to parents as well. Second, the books chosen by the teachers for initial reading instruction in Grade 1 as well as parents' retail purchases and library book choices suggest that stories continue to be seen as the most appropriate materials for learning to read, at least in the early stages. Third, and in contrast, a few of the participants—including the independent bookstore staff, the teacher in one preschool, the public library librarians, the independent nature store owner, and the kindergarten teacher—particularly noted that children like both genres. The bookstore and library displays, however, seemed to play to adult clientele's perceptions and preferences.

Limitations of the study

The findings of this study are limited in their generalizability to the venue groups; the displays in the daycares, preschools, out-of-school cares, classrooms, and school and public libraries may not be representative of these venues in general. In some chain retail stores, what is displayed is sometimes determined by head office, so there may be more consistency among these stores. However, other retail stores make their own decisions, so those stores in the study may also not be representative of stores in general. The findings are also limited in their generalizability to other median-household-income neighbourhoods. The results should therefore be considered suggestive of trends but not definitive. As well, a few venues, such as second-language daycares or classrooms, were not visited and, therefore, some children's experiences have not been included.

Although the counts were done thoroughly, they may in some instances be approximate. The displays may have been depleted despite my attempts to sample them before they were picked over; indeed, there were times when books were being chosen and replaced as the tally was being done. It is possible that some story books that should have been included were not because they were considered to be for an age beyond the study cohort. However, any story books omitted would have made that category's share of the displays even more disproportionate than what the tally showed.

Various program themes in the daycares and preschools may have limited the variety of topics put on display. They may also privilege more or less informational materials, as would curricular requirements in the kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. The counts, therefore, are snapshots in time, and the balance of genres and topics may vary. Categorizing books by topic was also subjective at times; some titles could be used for a variety of themes.

Despite these limitations, however, the results paint a picture of significant neighbourhood-wide preference for stories in almost all of the venues that provide books to young children.

Discussion

The value of both stories and informational books in the reading lives of young children has been clearly articulated in the educational research, and studies of

children's choices in libraries have shown the effectiveness of displays in increasing circulation of showcased books. Dalton (1991) stated that displays can "encourage students to choose books that are different thus broadening their interests" (40).

From the perspective of reader response theory (Ross 2005), displays enhance children's opportunity for interaction with and response to texts, which is an important component of the selection and reading process. Rosenblatt's (1978, 1991) contribution to an understanding of the reader's relationship with the text emphasizes the value of both efferent and aesthetic responses in the range of reading experience; in the case of informational books, enhancement of interaction with these books through displays may instil in the beginning reader not only a sense of the usefulness of informational books but also the emotionally enriching experience of them. Both experiences draw children to read more, and to read more variety. Meek's (1988) statement "texts teach what readers learn" (n.p.) underlines the importance of reading a wide assortment of materials, including stories, informational books, and the range of subgenres in each genre as an integral part of learning about "the nature and variety of written discourse" (21).

In this neighbourhood, children whose reading interests include informational books would find a very limited selection in almost all the neighbourhood displays and thus would have limited opportunity for interaction with these books. Although there were 30 informational topics in the neighbourhood tally and individual children's experiences would vary, it is unlikely that any child would find a reasonable variety of them. Books on concepts or animals were available in several venues, but 20 topics were found in only one or two venues. Indeed, a child who attended either of the two daycares with the limited display selections, who did not visit the public library, and whose parents did not frequent specialty stores such as the nature store or bookstores, would have seen only one informational book displayed in their neighbourhood venues at the time of the study.

The greater proportion of informational books in the educational settings of one preschool, both classrooms, and an out-of-school care partially addressed the imbalance of genres; however, while some children's interests are in the curricular topics mostly favoured by these venues, other children would miss out on books that interest them. In addition, informational books may be perceived as related to school curricular requirements only. McKechnie (2006) has noted that some recreational topics in particular "are not privileged as *real* reading" (66), and in this neighbourhood recreational topics were missing in most of the venue displays. As well, the school library with displays favoured stories for this age group even though the non-fiction collection was extensive.

The customary assertions presented in this paper's introduction—that stories are best for learning to read and that children prefer them—appear to continue to hold sway, both by most of the adults who choose what books to display in the various locales and by the parents who buy books from stores and borrow books from libraries.

The importance of public library displays

Given the importance of the early years in setting the stage for reading skills and lifelong interest in reading, the disparity of opportunity to find both genres in displays suggests implications for public-library practice.

The public library is a community leader in provision of children's books and has a long tradition and mandate of supporting early literacy. With its comprehensive children's collection of both stories and informational books, the library has the opportunity to compensate for the paucity of informational books in displays in other neighbourhood locations. Including more informational books encourages children to find books about their present interests and also introduces them to a wide array of topics of which they may be unaware.

The library's presentation of informational books in displays has other valuable effects as well. The library, as the leader in literacy initiatives, would endorse informational books by showcasing a variety of them along with story books, thus informing parents that these books are also helpful for beginning readers. This in turn may possibly influence retail selection, which is determined by what customers will buy. Daycare, preschool, and classroom teachers, some of whom borrow extensively to supplement their own displays or who bring children to the library for field trips, may also reconsider their emphasis on stories. This in turn, again, may influence parents' decisions on choices of books.

The findings of this study suggest several practical ways to enhance the public library's role in introducing young children to the range of materials written for them through displays. In children's areas where the juvenile non-fiction books are beside the story books, displays like those on top of the story book shelves would help balance the numbers in each genre, while upright books on the Dewey system-organized non-fiction shelves or on shelf tops above the subject would both draw attention to the books and point to their shelf location. In children's areas where the non-fiction books are several shelves away from the story books, or in libraries where the juvenile non-fiction is shelved in the adult non-fiction section, displays in the young children's area can alert parents to these books and also provide directions to the appropriate area of the library.

The content of the displays should also be considered. Displays featuring both stories and non-fiction titles on themes ([Aschenbeck 2009](#)) would introduce children and parents to how the genres can complement each other. In particular, displays on recreational topics such as hobbies and sports could balance the predominance of curricular titles found in school classrooms. Displays can also be a supplement to other public library initiatives, such as literacy programs, storytimes, or summer reading programs. The concern that stories are easier to draw children in when read aloud may be partially addressed by using narrative informational books ([Baxter 2007](#)); topics of wide interest such as animals may also appeal to children in group readings. The presented books could then be highlighted in displays for those children who want to continue to explore the topic.

Suggestions for further study

The findings also suggest recommendations for further study to optimize displays and reading choices in the public library. This study investigated children's opportunities to choose stories or informational books from displays, while operating under the assumption—based on previous studies of children's preferences and the effect of displays—that increasing the proportion of informational books on display would lead to more informational books being chosen by children and parents. A next step would be verification of this assumption through methods such as tallies of display titles sold in retail stores or library circulation records of displayed books. Reader response theory also suggests the need to explore how children interact with displays, their contents, and their locations. Ethnographic observation or interviews would shed light on children's perspectives and preferences toward this aspect of their reading worlds. Given the role of parents' decisions on young children's reading materials, more study into parental choices would also add to the discussion.

Conclusion

Providing a more balanced selection of stories and informational books in public library displays would compensate for the lack of selection of informational books elsewhere in the neighbourhood. It could lead to the widening of the reading worlds of young children, and of the adults who choose books for them, so as to include the full range of books and topics written for this age group. This in turn would support young children's beginning reading skills, inspire their imaginations and interests, and promote exploration of new topics. It would also enhance children's experience of the public library as a rich resource of stories and informational books to appeal to every taste, thus setting the stage for a lifelong passion for its place in their reading lives.

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Appendix: Rules for establishing the age appropriateness of books from publishers' recommendations

For a book to be counted, the number of years in the publisher's recommended age range that fall within the 4- to 8-year-old age range must be the same or more than the number of years that fall outside the age range of the study group. For example, books recommended for ages 7 to 10 were included (7 and 8 are inside the range, while 9 and 10 are not) while those rated ages 7 to 11 were not (7 and 8 are inside the range, while 9, 10, and 11 are not).

Books labelled 6+ were included as this recommendation covers more than half the study-group ages (6, 7, and 8).

Books labelled 7+ were not counted as this recommendation covers less than half the study-group ages (7 and 8).

Where both reading levels and interest levels were given, I used interest levels. Levelled readers for all reading-skill stages were counted.