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Finding Informational Books for Beginning Readers: An  
Ecological Study of a Median-Household-Income Neighbourhood  
/ À la recherche de littérature non romanesque à  
l'usage des lecteurs débutants : Étude écologique  
d'un quartier composé de ménages à revenu médian

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**Abstract:** Day cares, preschools, out-of-school care centres, school classrooms and libraries, a public library, and stores in a median-household-income neighbourhood were visited to determine the number of stories and informational books for children ages four to eight in the collections. Almost all collections were mostly stories, and the total selection was 80% stories. Educational curricula often determined the informational titles offered, while informational books for recreational reading were more difficult to find. Stories were likely further promoted through venue connections. School and public libraries have opportunities to promote informational books and to provide wide and accessible collections for the neighbourhood's beginning readers.

**Keywords:** informational books, non-fiction, beginning readers, neighbourhood, access

**Résumé :** Nous avons visité les garderies, les écoles prématernelles, les services de garde périscolaires, les salles de classe et les bibliothèques, la bibliothèque publique ainsi que les magasins d'un quartier composé de ménages à revenu médian, dans le but de déterminer le nombre de livres de fiction et de livres de non-fiction de leurs collections qui sont destinés aux enfants âgés de quatre à huit ans. Presque toutes les collections contenaient surtout des ouvrages de fiction. Sur la sélection totale, 80% des livres étaient des ouvrages de fiction. Ce sont souvent les programmes d'enseignement qui ont déterminé les titres de non-fiction offerts, mais les livres de non-fiction destinés à la lecture récréative sont plus difficiles à trouver. Il est probable que la fiction s'est trouvée renforcée par certaines interconnexions entre les sites visités. Les bibliothèques scolaires et publiques ont la possibilité de promouvoir les livres de

non-fiction et de mettre à la disposition des lecteurs débutants de leur quartier des collections bien fournies et accessibles.

Mots-clés : non-fiction, lecteurs débutants, quartier, accès

## Introduction

While stories have traditionally held sway as the appropriate materials for beginning readers (Pappas 1991, 1993), the importance of including informational books as a valuable complement to stories is well supported by educational research and theory. The few studies on their availability, however, suggest that young children's need for informational books may not be met in their local neighbourhoods even though many titles in a range of topics are published annually (R. R. Bowker 2012). The aim of this study was to investigate the selection of books offered to young children in the public places of a median-household-income neighbourhood to determine whether beginning readers are finding a wide array of informational books along with stories to support their reading needs and interests.

## Defining stories and informational books

For this study, *stories* or *storybooks* are defined as narrative or narrative-poetic works of fiction in picture-book, levelled-reader, and picture-book-and-cassette-or-CD formats. Folk tales and fairy tales are also included in this category.

For this study, *informational books* are defined as books written to provide information or to present facts on a topic. They are sometimes referred to as non-fiction books (Duke and Bennett-Armistead 2003). Informational books for young children cover a wide variety of texts and formats, and as such have been categorized by educators and researchers in various ways for various purposes (Maloch and Bomer 2013a). Some informational books may be easily recognizable by their expository text, generic or generalized nouns, timeless present tense, a table of contents and index, technical terminology and illustrations, a glossary, and so on (Duke 2000; Duke and Bennett-Armistead 2003; Pappas 1991; Yopp and Yopp 2000). They may also have specific organizational structures such as classifications (e.g., field guides and manuals) or instructions (e.g., arts and crafts books, experiment books, cookbooks, activity or things-to-do books, or games books). Other informational books may share narrative or poetic text and fictional or fantasy elements with stories. Because of this overlap with stories, subgenres such as narrative informational picture books, informational storybooks, poetry informational books, and biographies have at times been omitted from past studies that have focused on the educational need for a specific informational textual style or content. However, for this study, titles with the main intent to inform or to present factual material are included as informational. Concept books are also considered informational for this study in that they present simple concepts such as letters, numbers, opposites, and colours. Informational levelled readers are also included. The inclusion of a wide

range of informational books is recognition that all the formats and texts can enrich young children's literacy development, reading experiences, and interests.

This study will also focus on books in print format. While electronic books are becoming more widespread and have many attractive features, print continues to be the dominant format. The Association of American Publishers reports that 11% of children's book sales are e-books ([Digital Book World 2014](#)), while a Scholastic report on children's reading noted that "overwhelmingly children who read ebooks still read primarily print books for fun" (2013).

### **The value of informational books for beginning readers**

The wide range of topics and formats of informational books provide numerous educational, social, and personal benefits for beginning readers. Studies such as those by [Pappas \(1991, 1993\)](#) and [Duke and Kays \(1998\)](#) have demonstrated that young children can understand and use informational text as well as narrative, and educational researchers have long asserted that exposure to both stories and informational books provides a range of benefits for academic success. Reading both types of texts provides practice in recognizing and negotiating a range of genres (e.g., [Maloch and Bomer 2013b](#); [Pappas 1991](#); [Yopp and Yopp 2000](#)), strengthening beginning reading skills, which in turn support academic competence. As well, researchers suggest that practice in using informational books in the early grades may alleviate the "fourth grade slump" in academic success ([Duke 2000, 202](#); [Yopp and Yopp 2000](#)) caused by unfamiliarity with these books. [Palmer and Stewart \(2003\)](#) and [Yopp and Yopp \(2000\)](#), among others, suggest that informational books of all formats also provide opportunities to increase vocabulary and content background knowledge, thus strengthening students' potential for success in science, social studies, and other informational subjects. Much reading by adults is informational; therefore, the need for competence in this genre is a strong educational priority ([Duke 2000, 2004](#); [B. Moss 2008](#)). The demands of the information age and the need for scientific literacy ([Pearson, Moje, and Greenleaf 2010](#)) have also prompted calls for inclusion of more informational books in the early grades ([Duke 2000](#)). Researchers in education (e.g., [Norris et al. 2008](#); [Pappas 2006](#); [M. Smith et al. 2006](#)) stress that to develop scientific literacy, children need instruction to read analytically and critically with the subset of informational books that have the language structure of scientific writing. The U.S. Common Core State Standards for language arts and literacy also promote more balanced use of informational text in elementary school ([Common Core State Standards Initiative 2015](#); [Maloch and Bomer 2013b](#)).

Informational books may also be important for reluctant readers. Many children who find learning to read a struggle prefer informational books and the facts they provide (e.g., [Caswell and Duke 1998](#); [Dayton-Sakari and Jobe 2003](#)), and studies such as those by [Caswell and Duke \(1998\)](#) and [Fink \(1995\)](#) demonstrate that interest in the subject matter may encourage perseverance. [Dreher \(2003\)](#) also promotes informational books for struggling readers. Aspects of the text structure may also appeal to these children. Many expository informational books, such as the Dorling Kindersley Eyewitness series, provide the

information in smaller, discrete pieces which may be easier to manage than a plot line and character development (Dayton-Sakari and Jobe 2003; Giblin 2000; McKechnie 2006; Mohr 2006).

A related value of informational books for struggling readers is their role in children's social lives. G. Moss (1999) found that group discussions around highly illustrated materials on topics such as football allow boys who have difficulty reading a chance to participate because they can add information they have gleaned from sources other than the text. Donovan, Smolkin, and Lomax (2000) also noted this group activity in classroom recreational reading. This experience provides them with an entry into the conversations that would be denied them with stories, and G. Moss (1999) and S. Smith (2004) argue that knowledge about a topic, whether dinosaurs, sports teams, or space, gives one the role of expert and therefore affords social currency and status among one's peers. Finally, many educators stress the importance of children seeing themselves as belonging to "the community of readers" (Dayton-Sakari and Jobe 2003, 27). For some young children, informational books may be the way into this group, thus providing an essential aspect of self-esteem so necessary to academic success.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for including informational books in the reading lives of young children is simply that children like to learn about the world around them. Informational books of all kinds provide opportunities for widening appreciation for the natural world, for exploring interests and hobbies, for inspiring the imagination, and for becoming knowledgeable about the things that matter to them in their lives. Voluntary reading is considered a must for developing literacy skills and encouraging a value of reading (e.g., Fractor et al. 1993; Krashen 2004, 2011), and studies and observations such as those by Duke and Kays (1998), Mohr (2006), Pappas (1991, 1993), and Dayton-Sakari and Jobe (2003) have demonstrated that informational books are the preferred materials for some children. Providing an array of stories and informational books for young children, not only in school but also in their recreational time, gives the widest variety of reading experiences, affirming them in their interests and motivating them to learn and read (Doiron 2003). This opportunity contributes to success in their formal education and sets the stage for a lifelong passion for reading and engagement in their world.

### **Past studies on the availability of informational books**

Although the value of informational books in the reading lives of young children is well recognized, the few studies noting their presence in neighbourhood venues suggest that they are under-represented compared to stories despite the relatively equal numbers of both genres published yearly (R. R. Bowker 2012). Most of the research has been conducted in educational settings for curricular purposes, and with varied definitions and inclusions for informational books. Duke's (2000) study of first grade classrooms in the Boston area demonstrated that only 3.6 minutes a day was spent with informational texts in written language work. Informational materials (grouped as informational [equivalent to expository], narrative-informational, and informational-

poetic) made up on average only 9.8% of classroom libraries, with low socioeconomic classrooms particularly undersupplied. [Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi's \(1996\)](#) survey of kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers across the United States recommended as having strong literacy programs found that on average only 6% of what was read was expository. [Yopp and Yopp \(2006\)](#) investigated the books that preschool to third grade teachers reported reading aloud to their classes, separating books into narrative (both fiction and non-fiction), informational (expository), mixed (both fictional narrative and informational components), and other (including biographies and instructions). They found that only 9% of materials read aloud were informational or mixed. As well, only 10% of books read aloud at home to children in a kindergarten class were informational or mixed.

More recently, [Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi's \(2010\)](#) study of second, third, and fourth grade classrooms, following [Duke's \(2000\)](#) categories of informational books, found that 22.3% of the classroom library print materials in the second grade classrooms were informational or narrative-informational (excluding biographies and procedure books). However, time spent on informational text was very low, with fewer minutes than in Duke's study. They also noted that teachers with less experience had proportionately more informational materials than those with more years of teaching experience. This finding suggests a shift in recognition of the value of informational text by the newer teachers. [Ness's \(2011\)](#) work on informational texts in elementary classrooms showed an increase in use, with kindergarten, first grade, and second grade mean daily use of 15.54, 18.36, and 27.51 minutes respectively. She also found that the mean percentage of informational text in classroom libraries had increased to 23.92%, 27.81%, and 36.44% of the collections respectively. Ness suggests, however, that more improvement is needed as informational text continues to be under-used. [Maloch and Bomer \(2013a, 2013b\)](#) also discuss the need for an increase in both the numbers and quality of informational books.

The use of informational texts in preschools has also been investigated in a study by [Pentimonti and colleagues \(2010\)](#). They found that 82% of the titles that the preschool teachers used in read-alouds were narrative, with 13% of titles mixed (having both narrative and informational components) and 4% expository. These results concur with their additional study in preschools ([Pentimonti, Zucker, and Justice 2011](#)), where 85.8% of books read aloud were narratives, with mixed texts at 8.5% (excluding biographies) and informational books a low 5.4%. The authors encourage the increased use of informational texts as read-alouds, particularly in educational content areas.

No assessments of school libraries for informational books aimed at beginning readers have been conducted. However, [Worthy, Moorman, and Turner's \(1999\)](#) study of sixth-graders' reading preferences noted that informational books and magazines on such topics as sports and cars were often in limited supply in classrooms and school libraries. [Palmer and Stewart \(2003\)](#) observed that many of the informational books the children in their study used from the school library were too difficult for them. They concluded that the teachers and

librarian may not have been aware of the available age-appropriate materials. In addition, primary students were not allowed to check out non-fiction materials from the school library until later in the school year. These studies in the formal educational settings of preschools, primary classrooms, and school libraries present a continuing picture of limited access to informational books, particularly recreational titles, compared to stories.

There have been few studies investigating the presence and accessibility of informational books for young children in other neighbourhood venues. A preliminary study of books offered for retail purchase in two chain bookstores, two independent bookstores, and three mass merchandise stores (Larkin-Lieffers 2007) showed that the large majority of books in all children's age groups were stories, and the selection of informational books for beginning readers was poor. A study of children's areas in public libraries (Larkin-Lieffers 2001) demonstrated that while the libraries carried good selections of both stories and informational books, the Dewey non-fiction book shelving was often located away from the young children's tables and chairs and sometimes in the adult non-fiction areas. This arrangement restricted young children's access because of their limited navigational skills and parents' preference for staying in the children's area. Much of the shelving was also too high for young children to reach, and most of the books on display were stories. Coupled with and compounding these problems of facility design and presentation are children's limited searching abilities. Shenton and Dixon's (2004) investigation of children finding non-fiction books in the public library showed that many of the young children did not have a search process. Instead, they relied on help from the adult who was with them. McKechnie's (1996) research on four-year-old girls in the public library found that only 8.4% of the materials borrowed were informational books. There have been no investigations of the balance of stories and informational books in day cares, which provide care for children up to and sometimes including kindergarten, or in out-of-school care centres, which provide care for elementary-age children before and after school and on work days when schools are closed. Book fairs and monthly book clubs, which offer the sponsoring school libraries, classrooms, or care centres their choice of reward books or cash based on sales volume, have not been studied. Many retail stores have also been missed.

These few studies along with those in classroom settings provide a beginning picture of the comparative numbers of stories and informational books in neighbourhood sites, but they are geographically scattered and venue-specific, and many focus on subsets of informational books with specific school-curricular uses. There is thus no comprehensive picture of what young children and their parents would find in their day-to-day lives outside the home. The day cares, preschools, out-of-school care centres, school classrooms and libraries, stores, and public libraries that provide books for young children create, both individually and together, a neighbourhood of opportunities and limitations that set the stage for beginnings in reading.

The importance of the local, lived environment as foundational in early literacy draws from the broader concept of *place*, encompassing the social, cultural,

and material components of a setting and how they interact with and influence each other to create the experience of living there (Chawla 1992; Ellis 2002, 2004; Eyles 1989; Low and Altman 1992; Tuan 1977). Ellis has emphasized a holistic understanding of the places of children's lives "as a form of curriculum—the lived experience that shapes and enables their growth and learning" (2002, 69), and this curriculum includes the reading materials available to children. Several studies (e.g., Constantino 2005; Di Loreto and Tse 1999; Neuman and Celano 2001) have shown differing socio-economic status as a neighbourhood factor in disparity of access to literacy resources in public venues; Neuman and Celano emphasize how these disparities in early childhood may have both initial and long-lasting effects on academic success.

The balance of stories and informational books is also a component of this sociocultural setting, and their relative presence or absence may have a significant effect on the development of literacy skills and on the varying perception of the value of stories or informational books, both in the process of learning to read and for their support of children's recreational interests. The "situated activity" (Lave and Wenger 1991, 29) and learning about books that children acquire in their environments through what, and how, adults offer them may also have significant early effects. McKechnie's (2006, 66) study of boys' home collections of books found that the boys viewed some of their informational materials as not "real reading" and that this value statement seemed to be in place before school instruction in reading.

My study aimed to expand the ecological investigation of young children's public reading worlds with a complementary approach to socio-economic circumstances, considering the disparity of access to genres in literacy resources. Given the many gaps in understanding of this issue from a dynamic, neighbourhood perspective, an example of a middle-class situation was considered an appropriate starting point (Patton 2002). The purpose of the study, as part of a larger study on young children's access to informational books, was to investigate the balance of stories and informational books for beginning readers, ages four to eight, in the day-to-day public places (as opposed to home settings) of a median-household-income neighbourhood, and to understand how these collections, separately and as interrelated components of the community, shape in part the reading world of the young children who live there. The questions asked were, What numbers and proportions of stories and informational books would young children, ages four to eight, find in the public places of a median-household-income neighbourhood? And how do these places together shape the neighbourhood aggregate selection of books for young children to read?

## **The design of the study**

### *The study neighbourhood*

I referred to Canadian census tract data (Statistics Canada 2009) to locate a residential neighbourhood with a public library in a western Canadian city that approximated the city and provincial census values for the median household income, which were \$63,082 and \$63,988 respectively. An additional criterion



was English as the language spoken mostly at home, which approximated the census civic and provincial values of 88.1% and 88.8% of the population respectively; the neighbourhood value was estimated at 84.4%. The unemployment rate was low, at approximately 5%, and English was the language used at work for almost all of the population.

The study neighbourhood, a mature, stable, and mostly residential area, covers about 7 square kilometres (2.7 square miles), providing a range of venues within easy walking or short driving distance for the residents who live there. Single-family houses of varying sizes on quiet, tree-lined streets make up the majority of homes, but there are also a few high-rise apartments and three-storey walk-ups as well as newer condominiums, seniors' residences, and rental townhouses. Front and back gardens, boulevards, and playing fields provide green spaces. There are several schools, childcare centres, and preschools and many recreational amenities. A sports centre with a swimming pool and an indoor ice rink is conveniently located, and there are community halls with outdoor playgrounds providing casual and programmed activities. Many shopping areas cater to a range of tastes and disposable incomes, including a major shopping mall with over 150 stores, several smaller outdoor malls, a choice of chain grocery stores, and a scattering of convenience stores. Residents also have easy access by road to other shopping opportunities, including small stand-alone stores and big-box stores, in nearby areas of the city. The public library is a newer, large, very active branch of the city public library system, located centrally in an outdoor mall.

#### *Finding the neighbourhood venues with books for young children*

I conducted a thorough search of the neighbourhood and consulted registries of day cares, out-of-school care centres, and preschools as well as a list of the city's public elementary schools to identify all the places appropriate for the study. Of the 15 retail stores that sold books for young children, 12 agreed to participate. Because of a conflict of interest, one of the chain grocery stores was replaced with another store of the same chain in a nearby neighbourhood. The selection therefore included a chain department store, a chain discount department store, a chain grocery and department store, two chain grocery stores, 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. I also located five stores that were outside the study neighbourhood but were popular and easily accessible destinations for purchasing books and other merchandise, to provide a comprehensive retail sample. All agreed to participate, which added a chain warehouse club store, a local chain used bookstore, an independent bookstore, a chain big-box bookstore, and a chain department and grocery store. I located six neighbourhood for-profit or non-profit childcare centres that did not have specialized programming, such as second language instruction, that might have influenced the selection of books. Two of the three day cares, the two out-of-school care centres, and the care centre with separate day-care and out-of-school

care rooms (which counted as two venues) participated. Two of the preschools in the neighbourhood that met the same criteria agreed to the study, and a third preschool just outside the study neighbourhood but in a census tract that was partially included in the study neighbourhood tracts was added to augment the sample. I approached the three neighbourhood public elementary schools with regular English programming only, but because of overly busy schedules or lack of interest only one school agreed to participate, offering the library only. However, a school outside of but near the study area agreed to participate in the kindergarten, Grade 1, and library components of the study. School book fair materials were added. The two monthly book club flyers for the study age range counted as one venue; the monthly book club flyers and the accompanying rewards catalogue for teachers were also counted as one venue. The public library agreed to participate. In total, 35 venues were included, providing a comprehensive picture of the neighbourhood supply of books for the study cohort.

### *Study methods*

To determine the selection of books, I used an environmental scan, which entailed two components: an inventory count of books in each venue and observations of marketing strategies to determine whether there were differences in presentation based on genre. I then conducted semi-structured interviews with venue staff willing to be included in the study on a range of topics related to their collections of books. The interviews were supplemented with document analysis of materials provided by the participants or accessed online that informed the collections and their use.

### **Environmental scan: Inventory**

I counted or estimated the numbers of stories and informational books (both the number of different titles and the total number of books) and made a list of informational topics, including the number of books on each topic, for each venue. To determine the books to be counted, I set the following guidelines for genre and age-appropriateness.

Chapter books, poetry, plays, and joke books were excluded as they were deemed too advanced for the full age range of the study cohort. Almost all board books were excluded as they generally cater to children younger than the study cohort. Puzzle and picture riddle books (e.g., *Waldo* or *I Spy* books), colouring and sticker books, tear-apart activity books, and toys or kits where the book was incidental were also excluded because of the limited reading component. Books of faith (e.g., prayer books), textbooks, and teacher resources were also excluded.

To determine genre, I used public library cataloguing for fiction storybooks or Dewey-catalogued non-fiction books as a guide. The reliability of my coding was confirmed through a second librarian rater's coding of a random sample of 200 books. The inter-rater agreement was 98.5% with a Cohen's kappa of 0.9634. To increase accuracy of genre selection for titles that bordered the fiction–non-fiction divide, I checked how they were catalogued in three large

city public libraries. Those few books not listed were assigned a genre based on my experience with other similar titles.

Books were included in the study if they were written in English for children ages four to eight years, preschool to Grade 2, as determined by publishers' recommendations. Since there is no standardization of recommendations across all publishers, I used the following rules:

1. The number of years or grades in the publisher's recommendation included in the 4- to 8-year-old age range and the preschool to Grade 2 range must be the same or more than the number of years or grades outside the designated study group. For example, books recommended for ages 7–10 were included (ages 7 and 8 are inside the range, while 9 and 10 are not), while those rated as for ages 7–11 were not (7 and 8 are inside the range, while 9, 10, and 11 are not).
2. Books labelled 6+ were included as more ages in the study range are within that range (6, 7, 8) than outside it (4, 5).
3. Books labelled 7+ were not counted as more ages are outside the range (4, 5, 6) than within it (7, 8).
4. If both age and grade ranges were given, I used the age range. Where both reading levels and interest levels were given, I used interest levels.
5. Levelled readers for all reading skill stages were counted.

The informational books that on initial assessment seemed to be age-appropriate or for a slightly older cohort were selected, and numbers, titles, and ISBNs were recorded by hand on data sheets. I later checked the publishers' age recommendations for each book on their websites. If this information was not available, I consulted reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Horn Book*, *Children's Literature*, *Resource Links*, *CM*, and *Publishers Weekly*. For those few books that were not listed on websites or in reviews, I consulted the Vancouver Public Library's cataloguing of Juvenile Non-fiction Easy, which is aimed at ages four to eight. If the book was not listed in any of these resources, I personally determined whether the book should be included based on my experience with these other guides.

Informational books were also classified according to broad topic, such as animals, space, and history. These data were collected to estimate the variety of informational books made available. To establish inter-rater reliability, the second librarian rater categorized the informational books from the random sample, and a third librarian rater was consulted to discuss any differences. As the topics were broad, there were few issues. Some topics tended toward a curricular focus, while others, such as outdoor recreation (e.g., camping), dance, fantasy (e.g., informational books on fairies or unicorns), and characters from television or other media (e.g., manuals about *Pokemon* or *Star Wars*), would be considered non-curricular or recreational topics. These designations are relative, however; curricular topics may also be personal interests.

Owing to the large volume of storybooks it was impractical to check individual age recommendations. I therefore chose a random sample of 50 picture

storybooks in the retail stores and noted the title and ISBN of each. The selection did not include any duplication of titles, series, or authors. I checked the publishers' age ranges for the books following the guidelines; my accuracy was 96% for the study cohort. Counts were thus done based on my judgement of the suitability of the books.

Total numbers and proportions of stories and informational books in each venue and for each venue group were calculated, along with means and standard deviations (sample) using Microsoft Excel (version 14.0 [2010] Microsoft Corporation, Redmond WA).

### Environmental scan: Marketing strategies

Marketing strategies for this study included the locations of the books and shelf heights. I drew maps, took photographs, and took notes on the location of the books relative to high- and low-traffic areas in each venue. I recorded the height of shelving for each book as above, at, or below eye level for children ages four to eight. To set the lower limit of eye level I used the height of the 5th percentile of girls at age four, subtracting 10 centimetres (4 inches) to arrive at eye level. The upper limit of eye level was determined using height for the 95th percentile of boys at age eight, subtracting 10 centimetres (4 inches) to arrive at eye level ([Canadian Paediatric Society 2009](#)). Eye level was thus set between 83 centimetres (33 inches) and 128 centimetres (51 inches). The approximate median height of children's books is 20 centimetres (8 inches). If the child looks at the middle of the book, then the shelf heights for eye level are between 73 centimetres (29 inches) and 118 centimetres (47 inches), calculated by subtracting 10 centimetres (4 inches) from the estimated eye level heights. When books overlapped each other on staggered shelving levels, shelf height was set at where the books became visible.

### Semi-structured interviews and document analysis

The second component of the data collection was semi-structured interviews with staff, which were conducted in their venues. The conversations covered a wide range of topics concerning their collections; for the objectives of this study, areas of interest were funding for the collections, collection development, curricular themes, and daily routines. For the retail venues, the staff discussed such topics as selection criteria, customer and sales staff preferences, and marketing. A few participants were contacted again at a later date to clarify or expand on their comments. All interviews, except one where notes were taken, were audio recorded and transcribed.

Some participants provided documents on curricular requirements, school board selection lists for elementary libraries, monthly book club flyers and catalogues, and day-care licensing and accreditation regulations to supplement their comments. I also searched online for any neighbourhood venue, retail store, book club, provincial government, or school board websites that might provide further relevant information regarding curricular topics and selection criteria or requirements for book choices.

The interviews and documents were coded and then explored using thematic analysis (Creswell 2003, 2005). In the analysis, I paid particular attention to the codes on funding, the sources of books, the ways the books were used, requests for titles in the libraries and stores, and mentions of other venues. The recurring themes led to an uncovering of neighbourhood interrelationships which were not initially evident in the participants' comments. These links were traced to develop an outline of the layers and connections among the venue members. The transcripts were read by a second rater with familiarity in interview coding to verify the thoroughness and consistency of the coding.

#### *Data collection in the venues*

Tallies for the environmental scan were recorded by hand in most of the venues as computers were usually not welcome, particularly in the retail stores. The counts in the retail stores were conducted in October and early November 2009, and again briefly in March and April 2010. These times avoided the September return to school and Christmas seasons, which might have affected what was offered for sale. The other venues were visited at times that did not coincide with holidays. In the retail stores and the book fair, books on the sales floor were counted, except in the chain mall bookstore, where numbers were estimated at the manager's request. Most of the chain retail stores declined interviews, as all decisions were made at the head office and interviews were not permitted. However, I was granted interviews with personnel from the chain discount department store, the chain dollar-type store, the chain educational store, the independent book and gift store, the independent nature store, the local chain used bookstore, and the independent bookstore. For the student monthly book clubs, books in both age-appropriate series in three monthly flyers were counted. Books in the accompanying three monthly flyers and the rewards catalogue for teachers were counted.

In the day cares, the out-of-school care centres, and two of the preschools the books in the rooms for the children and in storage were counted. The third preschool allowed counts of the books in the classroom but did not allow a count of the books in storage, preferring to provide an estimate instead. When counting the books, I noted any marks, such as crossed-out barcodes from libraries, that indicated the sources of the books. One day-care assistant manager, a representative of the government-sponsored day-care accreditation process, one out-of-school care manager, and four teachers from the three preschools provided interviews. I also checked online for information on government licensing and accreditation requirements.

In the kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms books made available to the students as well as teacher collections on shelves in the classroom were counted. In the Grade 1 classroom, books in storage boxes were not included as the teachers found it too inconvenient to provide them. The kindergarten teacher, the two team-teaching teachers from the Grade 1 classroom, and the principal gave interviews. I also consulted online curricular requirements and materials.

The collections in the school libraries were too large to be counted individually; therefore, I used a combination of methods. In school library 1 the staff provided numbers of hardcover and paperback stories, while in school library 2 the staff provided an estimate of hardcover stories, and I counted the paperback stories. Concept books shelved with the stories were estimated as well as the occasional informational book that was shelved as a story. Both schools shelved some paperback informational books with the paperback stories; all these informational books were counted and checked on publishers' websites. For the Dewey-catalogued non-fiction, I made an initial assessment of all the books that were age-appropriate or for a slightly older cohort, and I took a proportional sample based on the numbers I assessed (Powell 1991), making sure to include all topics. These books were checked against publishers' recommendations or reviews, and the results extrapolated to the full collection. The staff in school library 2 alerted me to any topics that may have been depleted owing to borrowing. The library staff member of school library 1 gave an interview. In school library 2 the library technician and a volunteer retired principal who was also a teacher-librarian gave interviews. I was also provided with school board documents related to school library collection development.

The public library collection was also too large to be counted individually. As well, since the city's branch collections were floating (i.e., books are not necessarily returned to the borrowing branch) the study branch's count was an estimate of what would likely be there at any one time. The youth services librarian provided a tally of the hardcover and paperback picture storybooks based on her catalogue records of the numbers of books on the shelf plus the numbers signed out through the library. She also provided an estimate of the total number of levelled readers, and the numbers of stories and informational books along with topics were extrapolated from shelf counts. Numbers of fairy tales, books with cassettes or CDs, and concept books were estimated. For the informational books other than concept books, the librarian provided an estimate of the numbers of age-appropriate hardcover and paperback Dewey-catalogued non-fiction books, again based on her records. I extrapolated the numbers in each topic within the collection based on a sample of the hardcover books sticker-marked as being for kindergarten to Grade 3, and on the paperback informational books on the shelves, following the same procedures as with the school libraries (Powell 1991). The public library's youth services librarian and youth collection development librarian gave interviews and also provided materials related to their literacy program.

## **The findings**

### *The venue collections*

#### **Day cares**

The size of the collections for four- and five-year-olds in the three day cares varied widely, with 26, 290, and 1,017 books respectively; stories were strongly preferred in all three centres, totalling 87% stories and 13% informational books, and with a mean of 12% informational books per day care (SD = 3.2). The

number of informational topics was limited in day care 1 and day care 2 but was more varied in day care 3 with its larger collection. Animals, concepts, and life skills and family were the dominant informational topics in the three day cares, accounting for over 62% of the informational selection. These books reflected a focus on curricular early learning topics for this age group. Day care 3's collection included some general-interest topics such as dinosaurs and prehistoric animals, holidays and celebrations, pets, and sports.

Government licensing regulations and accreditation standards for the day cares required that some books must be provided but with no stipulation of number or genre. The day cares were responsible for funding their collections. The for-profit day cares 1 and 2 had small collections; the non-profit day care 3 ran a monthly book club program, which, through sales rewards, was the main source of the books in their extensive collection. They also had donations of used books from parents, staff, school staff, and the school where they were located, and they received book fair profits. The staff did not mention using online sources for purchasing books. Day care 3 also conducted summer field trips to the public library to allow the children to borrow books and arranged for library staff to visit the centre for story times.

Data from the environmental scan are presented in [table 1](#). As there were very few duplicate titles in each collection, numbers of books only are provided. There was no difference in the heights of shelving or locations for the stories and informational books.

### Preschools

All the preschools had extensive collections of books for four- and five-year-olds, although the teachers' genre preferences varied widely. The teacher of preschool 1 strongly favoured stories and noted that although 28% of the books on display were informational they were not indicative of her preference. Preschool 2 had many program themes that were best illustrated with stories as well as some that could accommodate both genres; the collection of 1,090 books was 86% stories and 14% informational books. Close to 30% of the informational titles were on concepts. Preschool 3 had a more balanced selection, with 30% informational books within the total collection of 504 books. The teacher thought the children enjoyed both genres, and she used both in her read-alouds. In total, 81% of the books in the three preschools were stories, and 19% were informational books, with a mean of 24% informational books ( $SD = 8.7$ ) per preschool.

Informational books in the preschool collections, like in the day cares, tended to cluster in topics which were integral parts of theme programming for this age group. Concepts, animals, life skills and family, health and the human body, and space made up 71% of the informational books. Some topics not related to preschool curricula included trucks, cars, and motorcycles; dinosaurs and prehistoric animals; pets; and fantasy.

Government licensing regulations were the same as for day cares, and the preschools, all of which were non-profit, were responsible for funding their collections. Preschool 1 depended on fundraisers and occasional budget allotments,

while preschools 2 and 3 had large collections owing to the parents' support of the monthly book club program and parents' and teachers' donations of books. Other sources were a donation of books from a fundraiser, public library discard sell-offs, and occasional retail purchases. None of the preschools bought materials from online sources.

All three preschools borrowed books from the public library to supplement their themes and took the children on library tours or had a librarian visit the preschool for story time. Numerical data are presented in [table 1](#). There was very little duplication of titles in the collections, and there was no difference in the shelving or location of stories and informational books.

### Out-of-school care centres

The three out-of-school care centres had 49, 622, and 162 books respectively. As with the day cares and preschools, stories strongly dominated in the collections, making up 81% of the scan, while informational books totalled 19%, with a mean of 23% (SD = 8.0) in the individual collections. The out-of-school care centres were responsible for funding and building their collections, and the selection and quality of the informational books varied extensively depending on the source of the books. For-profit out-of-school care centre 1 had an old and small collection. Non-profit out-of-school care centre 2 depended mostly on parents' donations of used or unwanted books, along with a few retail purchases; the collection included a mix of 25 curricular and non-curricular, recreational topics, with animals and concepts making up 43% of the informational selection. Out-of-school care centre 3, also a non-profit centre located in an elementary school, had a collection of mostly older books that tended toward curriculum-based non-fiction materials as many were discards from the school library. Other books appeared to be purchases from used book, discount, or public library discard sales. None of the out-of-school care centres appeared to have monthly book club funding, likely because these programs were in the classrooms of the schools where they were located.

[Table 1](#) provides a summary of the numerical data. There was little or no duplication of titles in each collection, and no difference in the location or shelving of stories and informational books.

### School classrooms

The kindergarten classroom collection was an anomaly in the study, as the majority of the 530 books were informational, comprising 62% of the collection. The levelled readers were 69% informational books and covered 26 curricular and non-curricular topics, with books on animals making up 43% of the selection. The rest of the classroom collection had 15 mostly curricular informational topics, of which almost two-thirds were concept or reference vocabulary books to support beginning reading. Recreational titles in the total classroom collection included such topics as arts and crafts; food and cooking; trucks, cars, and motorcycles; and construction. It was not clear why this classroom selection was anomalous, but the large numbers of small concept and reference vocabulary



Table 1: Number and percentage of stories and informational books in the study-area day cares, pre-schools, and out-of-school care centres

	Total Books	Stories		Info Books		Number of Topics
		No.	%	No.	%	
<b>Day cares</b>						
Day-care room in care centre 1	26*	24	92	2	8	1
Day care 2	290	249	86	41	14	10
Day care 3	1,017	881	87	136	13	21
Mean (SD)	444 (513.2)	385 (444.3)	88 (3.2)	60 (68.9)	12 (3.2)	11 (10.0)
<b>Preschools</b>						
Preschool 1	43**	31	72	12	28	4
Preschool 2	1,090	936	86	154	14	22
Preschool 3	504	351	70	153	30	20
Mean (SD)	546 (524.7)	439 (458.9)	76 (8.7)	106 (81.7)	24 (8.7)	15 (9.9)
<b>Out-of-school care centres</b>						
Out-of-school care in care centre 1	49*	38	78	11	22	8
Out-of-school care centre 2	622	527	85	95	15	25
Out-of-school care centre 3	162	112	69	50	31	15
Mean (SD)	278 (303.5)	226 (263.6)	77 (8.0)	52 (42.0)	23 (8.0)	16 (8.5)

\*Probably the total collection but not confirmed.

\*\*Values are for displayed books only; teacher did not allow inventory of books in storage. Given the teacher's comments, the proportion of stories is likely higher than in the displays.

books may have partially skewed the balance of books that were not levelled readers. As well, the teacher commented that the classes were mostly boys, and she therefore chose some of the books in response to their interests and reading tastes in dinosaurs, space, and other informational topics.

The Grade 1 classroom collection totalled 2,418 books and, in contrast to the kindergarten class, had a total of 77% stories. Stories played an integral role in the teachers' instructional style, and stories were initially used to teach reading. The levelled readers were 76% stories, while the informational choices covered 36 topics. Animals was the most represented topic along with life skills and family, concepts, and geography and cultures. Several non-curricular topics such as pets, sports, clothing, and arts and crafts were included in the readers. Non-fiction materials other than the levelled readers were used by the teachers for subject instruction, and later in the year the children were given instruction on how to use them for research projects. These books covered 17 mostly curricular topics; recreational topics included trucks, cars, and motorcycles and arts and crafts.

Collections were funded mostly by school budgets. The kindergarten teacher also purchased from retail stores, and both classrooms ran monthly book clubs for free reward books. Both the kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers

borrowed from the school library and took their classes on regular weekly visits to the school library to borrow books for home reading.

Data are presented in [table 2](#). There was little duplication of titles; therefore, only numbers are given. There was no difference in the shelving or location of the genres.

### School libraries

School library 1 had a collection of 4,567 books for young children, while school library 2 had 9,209 books for the study cohort. Although the size of the two school library collections differed greatly, both had collections totalling 79% stories and 21% informational books for the study cohort. The informational books covered 39 topics in both libraries, and curricular topics came first in collection development. The collections had many books on animals and some on popular non-curricular, recreational topics such as pets, dinosaurs and prehistoric animals, and arts and crafts, but other topics, such as trucks, cars, and motorcycles and dance, were poorly represented or missing. The library staff chose the books for the collections, aided by the local school board curricular recommendations, requests from teachers, vendor sales, and some popular demand. Institutional vendors, book fairs, and publishers were sources of books, while online sites were not mentioned for purchases.

School library 1 had a policy, based on teachers' decisions, to limit the early grades from borrowing Dewey-catalogued non-fiction books as they were seen as less useful than stories in supporting early reading skills. The story area provided 93% stories and 7% informational books covering 16 mostly curricular topics. Books on concepts or animals made up over half of this informational collection. School library 2's borrowing policy preferred kindergarten and Grade 1 students to browse in the area with the hardcover and paperback stories and the easy paperback non-fiction; Grade 1 students were allowed to go into the Dewey-catalogued non-fiction in the latter part of the school year. The collection available for the children in the story and paperback area was an estimated 91% stories, although the informational books had 31 topics represented.

Funding for the collections differed widely. School library 2 had school budget funding, substantial book fair profits, and a birthday book program whereby parents could donate \$10 for a plaque to be placed in a new book on the occasion of their child's birthday. School library 1 had funding only from the school budget.

Data are presented in [table 2](#). There were few duplicate titles in the collections.

### Public library

The branch public library collection for the study cohort was extensive, with 7,968 books; the materials were 74% stories and 26% informational books, which was proportionately more of the latter than in most of the other venues in the study. Informational books covered 49 topics, the most for any of the neighbourhood venues. Animals was the most represented topic, and there were

Table 2: Number and percentage of stories and informational books in the study-area school classrooms, school libraries, and public library

	Total Books	Stories		Info Books		Number of Topics
		No.	%	No.	%	
School classrooms						
Kindergarten	530	201	38	329	62	28*
Grade 1	2,418	1,861	77	557	23	39**
Mean (SD)	1,474 (1,335.0)	1,031 (1,173.8)	58 (27.6)	443 (161.2)	42 (27.6)	34 (7.8)
School libraries						
School library 1	4,567	3,598	79	969	21	39
School library 2	9,209	7,276	79	1,933	21	39
Mean (SD)	6,888 (3,282.4)	5,437 (2,600.1)	79 (0)	1,451 (681.7)	21 (0)	39 (0)
Public library	7,968	5,859	74	2,109	26	49

\*Total topics; levelled readers covered 26 topics, other books covered 15 topics, and some of these topics overlapped.

\*\*As above; levelled readers covered 36 topics, and other books covered 17 topics.

several non-curricular, recreational topics such as computers and electronics, dance, sports, money, and outdoor recreation that were difficult to find in or missing from other venues. The collection development librarian chose materials based on quality, a broad range of genres, formats and topics, popular demand, and specific requests by adults and children. They also supplemented school curricula. At the time of the study, the city library system was promoting an early literacy initiative in all branches, and the list of recommended books for three- to five-year-olds in a pamphlet for parents was all stories. The library also ran story times for preschoolers that featured stories, songs, and rhymes. Preschool and day-care tours included the various parts of the children's collection.

The children's story area, with the hardcover and paperback storybooks, concept books, and levelled readers in low or face-front shelves, had comfortable seating and computers set up for young children, and it was a preferred seating and browsing area for families. Fairy tales were located nearby, but the Dewey-catalogued non-fiction collection was located past the fiction for older children, five shelves away.

Data on the books in the public library collection are presented in [table 2](#).

### Retail stores

The stores in the study neighbourhood and nearby areas offered a large selection of books ranging from low-priced used books, to inexpensive paperbacks and anonymously authored books, to discounted quality hardcover remainders, to full-price newly published titles. The scan found 15,598 books on retail shelves, of which 13,473, or 86%, were stories. Of the 5,811 titles, 84% were stories.

The chain department and chain discount department stores, the chain grocery and department store, the chain department and grocery store, and the chain toy store carried very similar merchandise, with a total of 2,688 books; 90% of the total was stories, with a mean of 89% stories ( $SD = 6.6$ ). Shoppers in any one of these stores would find a very limited selection of informational books with few topics. Recreational informational books on characters from television and movies accounted for 43% of the titles. Books on concepts, dinosaurs and prehistoric animals, and animals were far behind. One of the two chain grocery stores carried a small selection of mostly stories and a few children's cookbooks. The second chain grocery store, in comparison, carried 651 books, of which 70% were stories and 30% were informational books covering an array of 21 curricular and recreational topics.

The chain discount off-price, chain dollar-type, and chain warehouse club stores carried merchandise based on discounted prices rather than purposeful selection, and therefore the inventory on any one day could vary. At the time of the study visits the total was 1,123 books, with stories at 80% of the total selection and with a mean of 80% per store ( $SD = 8.8$ ). Informational books covered a small selection of topics. In comparison, the chain educational store and the independent book and gift store had more balanced selections of stories and informational books, while the independent nature store stocked more informational books. The total for these three specialty stores was 50% stories and a mean of 51% stories ( $SD = 8.5$ ). The manager of the chain educational store noted that the informational materials were aimed at curricular needs of teachers, early childhood educators, and parents, while the owners of the nature store had specific knowledge relating to animals, ecology, and conservation. However, these three specialty stores accounted for only about 3% of the total retail selection with 478 books and tended to be higher priced.

The four bookstores carried a total of 10,615 books, comprising 68% of the neighbourhood retail store total. Stories made up 89% of their stock and with a mean of 88% stories per store ( $SD = 4.7$ ). The variety of materials ranged widely. The local chain used book store carried 84% stories with a very limited choice of informational books. Their selection was based on what customers brought in for resale, and the manager noted that they received far more stories. The chain mall bookstore and the chain big-box bookstore, the leading national sources for children's books ([Canadian Publishers' Council 2005](#)), strongly favoured stories. The chain mall store's selection was 95% stories, with 17 informational topics, many of which were recreational. Concepts and manuals of characters from television and movies accounted for 52% of the informational titles, with several other topics covered in the levelled readers. The store's books were moderately priced. The chain big-box bookstore carried 88% stories in both paperback and hardcover formats. Although the proportion of informational books was low, their large inventory allowed them to carry books in 36 curricular and recreational topics, often in more expensive hardcover format. The independent bookstore carried 87% stories in both paperback and hardcover format and offered 30 topics among the informational titles. The staff

member commented that their clientele included many teachers, homeschoolers, and school library staff as well as parents, and the non-fiction stock was thus largely based on curricular requirements.

#### Monthly book clubs and book fair

The monthly book club, book fair, and rewards catalogue selections totalled 2,510 books, of which 75% were stories; the number of informational topics ranged from 11 in the teacher materials to 30 in the student monthly flyers. Informational books on animals were the most represented, with 23% of the total, followed by concepts, space, dinosaurs and prehistoric animals, trucks, cars and motorcycles, and characters from movies and television.

Data on the books for the retail stores, monthly book clubs, and book fair are presented in [table 3](#). There was little, if any, difference in the shelving and locations of genres and little duplication of titles across venues.

#### *Summary of the neighbourhood selection of stories and informational books*

The total number of stories and informational books counted in the scan was 46,603, although this number is incomplete as a small proportion of books in storage or on loan were not included in the counts. In the neighbourhood as a whole and in almost all of the venues there was an overwhelming preference for stories; 80% of the books in the scan were stories, with informational books making up 20% of the selection. A summary of the counts in the venues is presented in [table 4](#).

Stories were particularly dominant for the younger members of the cohort. Those who attended any of the day cares or preschools 1 or 2 would find on average 86% stories, while the limited number of informational topics tended to support the day-care and preschool curricular themes. Preschool 3 provided proportionately more informational books than the other venues.

The kindergarten classroom was an anomaly with its preponderance of informational titles. Children in these classes would find many informational books in the levelled readers, with the rest of the collection supporting in part the interests of the students in such topics as dinosaurs and space. With the neighbourhood children's entry into Grade 1 there was a continuation of stories as the dominant genre and preferred choice for initial reading instruction. However, the proportion of informational books increased to 23%; the titles that were not levelled readers were mostly curricular in support of the content areas. The total collections of each school library were 79% stories. The informational books supported curricular needs, along with some titles mostly in the more popular recreational topics. The areas of the collections that the kindergarten and Grade 1 children were allowed to visit had 93% and 91% stories in school libraries 1 and 2 respectively.

The chain department stores, the chain department and grocery stores, the chain toy store, and the discount stores carried moderately priced books and heavily favoured stories, which made up 87% of their selections. The choice of informational books was limited to mostly popular topics such as characters

Table 3: Number and percentage of stories and informational books in the study-area retail stores, monthly book clubs, and book fair

	Total Books	Stories		Info Books		Number of Topics
		No.	%	No.	%	
Chain department stores and chain toy store						
Chain department store	67	63	94	4	6	1
Chain discount department store	199	158	79	41	21	8
Chain grocery and department store	656	581	89	75	11	9
Chain department and grocery store	721	693	96	28	4	4
Chain toy store	1,045	935	89	110	11	6
Mean (SD)	538 (400.4)	486 (367.4)	89 (6.6)	52 (41.5)	11 (6.6)	6 (3.2)
Chain grocery stores						
Chain grocery store	43	29	67	14	33	1
Chain grocery store	651	457	70	194	30	21
Mean (SD)	347 (429.9)	243 (302.6)	68 (2.1)	104 (127.3)	32 (2.1)	11 (14.1)
Chain discount stores						
Chain off-price clothing store	120	104	87	16	13	6
Chain off-price home decor store	113	92	81	21	19	6
Chain dollar-type store	270	181	67	89	33	5
Chain warehouse club store	620	520	84	100	16	3
Mean (SD)	281 (237.5)	224 (201.1)	80 (8.8)	56 (44.2)	20 (8.8)	5 (1.4)
Specialty stores						
Chain educational store	316	160	51	156	49	19
Independent nature store	89	37	42	52	58	6
Independent book and gift store	73	43	59	30	41	8
Mean (SD)	159 (135.9)	80 (69.3)	51 (8.5)	79 (67.3)	49 (8.5)	11 (7)
Bookstores						
Local chain used bookstore	424	358	84	66	16	13
Independent bookstore	3,232	2,819	87	413	13	30
Chain mall bookstore	1,544	1,473	95	71	5	17
Chain big-box bookstore	5,415	4,770	88	645	12	36
Mean (SD)	2,654 (2,172.7)	2,355 (1,898.5)	88 (4.7)	299 (282.2)	12 (4.7)	24 (10.8)
Book clubs and book fair						
Book club monthly student flyers	1,075	857	80	218	20	30
Book club monthly teacher flyers and rewards catalogue	666	505	76	161	24	11
Book fair	769	519	67	250	33	17
Mean (SD)	837 (212.7)	627 (199.3)	74 (6.7)	210 (45.1)	26 (6.7)	19 (9.7)

Table 4: Total number and percentage of stories and informational books in the study-area venues

	Total Books	Stories		Info Books		Number of Topics
		No.	%	No.	%	
Day cares (3)	1,333	1,154	87	179	13	1, 10, 21
Preschools (3)	1,637	1,318	81	319	19	4, 22, 20
Out-of-school care centres (3)	833	677	81	156	19	8, 25, 15
Kindergarten (1)	530	201	38	329	62	28
Grade 1 (1)	2,418	1,861	77	557	23	39
School libraries (2)	13,776	10,874	79	2,902	21	39, 39
Public library (1)	7,968	5,859	74	2,109	26	49
Retail stores (18)	15,598	13,473	86	2,125	14	1–36
Book fair, monthly book clubs (3)	2,510	1,881	75	629	25	11, 17, 30
Total books	46,603	37,298	80	9,305	20	1–49

from television and movies, concepts, and animals. Those customers who sought out the independent bookstore and chain big-box bookstore would have found a total of 88% stories but also the largest selection of informational topics, with 30 and 36 topics respectively. Many of these books were in the more expensive hardcover format. The specialty stores also carried a small but balanced collection of materials. The book fair and student monthly flyers carried 25% informational books at discounted prices, including both curricular and non-curricular titles in 30 topics. However, these books were not readily available to all parents and children.

The informational topics of animals, concepts, life skills and family, geography and cultures, and dinosaurs and prehistoric animals were widely available; these five topics accounted for just over 50% of the informational books in the scan and were found on average in 23 venues. Many other curricular topics were found in a range of venues. The recreational topics of pets, characters from television and movies, arts and crafts, and sports were found on average in 15 venues. Other mostly recreational topics were very limited; dance, computers and electronics, money, outdoor recreation, and hobbies (e.g., carpentry, photography) were found on average in only two collections. The public library provided the fullest range of informational books, with 49 topics, including non-curricular recreational materials that were difficult to find or missing in other venues.

In the venues other than the libraries there was little difference in how the genres were located and shelved. Display data have been reported previously (Larkin-Lieffers 2013); in summary, 86% of the books on display in the neighbourhood venues were stories.

#### *The interrelationships of the neighbourhood venues*

While the staff in each venue decided on the books in their own collections, their interview statements about such topics as where the books came from, how they built their collections, and how they used the books indicated many

connections and layers among the neighbourhood venues in movement, use, and possible influence on choice of books. Key findings from the interviews, documents, and environmental scan concerning venue connections are summarized by venue setting in [table 5](#).

In the elementary schools, the libraries were a source of books for the classrooms, as is their mandate. The staff in both school libraries noted that the teachers helped to determine the choice of books in the library through recommendations to support their curriculum teaching. Schools and school libraries may also affect other neighbourhood collections. Non-profit day care 3, located in an elementary school, received discarded books from the school, while non-profit out-of-school care centre 3, also located in an elementary school, had discarded books from the school library. In this way the materials chosen for the school and school library became the choices available in other locations as the books, usually curricular based, were recycled. School library 1 also sold off some of their discards to students and parents.

The public library's role in the reading world of the neighbourhood's children was varied and wide ranging. As well as a source of books for families, the library was a contributor to the selection and use of books in several other venues. The staff from all the preschools regularly borrowed books from the library to supplement their themes; the teacher in preschool 3 noted that she did not buy some titles if she could get them from the library. Preschools 1 and 3 arranged field trips to the library, and preschool 2 had library staff visit their classroom to do story times. Day care 3 also had field trips to the library for the children to borrow books as well as library staff visits to their centre. As reported by the retired teacher-librarian from school library 2, the teachers had also borrowed books at times from the public library, and the public library had visited the school library as well. The public library also contributed to the permanent collections of day care 2 and preschool 2 through sell-offs of weeded materials, which were seen as good-quality, inexpensive choices.

While this was not articulated as such by the participants, the public library may have influenced the venues' choices of books through their early literacy initiative, displays, and library design. The city library system's popular early literacy initiative promoted all stories, and the displays of age-appropriate books in the children's area were 90% stories ([Larkin-Lieffers 2013](#)). The small, comfortable seating and the computers for children by the storybooks indicated that this area was for young children's materials, while the children's Dewey non-fiction collection was located several shelves away. Although the library staff encouraged both genres, these aspects of the library experience may have both promoted stories and made them easier to find.

In turn, the youth collections development librarian noted that as their collections are to some extent demand driven, the teachers', day-care and preschool staffs, and families' borrowing activity with regard to children's books could influence what was chosen for the collection. The librarians commented that books children had seen in school, in public library visits to the classes, or in book club flyers were often requested in the library. This remark echoes



Table 5: Key findings from the interviews, documents, and the environmental scan concerning venue connections

Day cares (interview with staff in day care 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Day cares 1 and 2: funding unknown; day care 3: funding from parents' monthly book club and book fair purchases</li> <li>• Sources of books were monthly book club and book fair rewards; parents', teachers', school staff's, and school donations of used books; purchases from public library discard sales and publishers</li> <li>• Day-care staff read books aloud to children, often to support curricular themes; all day cares provided books for voluntary reading</li> <li>• Day care 3 arranged visits to public library, and public library staff visited day care</li> </ul>
Preschools (interviews with teachers in preschools 1, 2, and 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preschool 1: funding from occasional school budget allotments or fundraisers; preschools 2 and 3: funding mostly from parents' monthly book club purchases, an occasional fundraiser, and occasional budget spending</li> <li>• Sources of books were monthly book club rewards; parents' and teachers' donations of used books; a donation of books from a fundraiser; purchases from public library discard sales, retail stores, and publishers; books borrowed from public library</li> <li>• Teachers read books aloud to children, often to support curricular themes; all preschools provided books for voluntary reading</li> <li>• Preschools 1 and 3 arranged visits to public library; preschool 2 had public library staff visit preschool</li> </ul>
Out-of-school care centres (interview with staff in out-of-school care centre 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Out-of-school care centre 2: funding from occasional supplies budget only</li> <li>• Sources of books were parents' donations of books; purchases from retail stores, book fairs, and public library discard sales; school library discards</li> <li>• Books were provided for voluntary reading</li> </ul>
Kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms (interviews with kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers, principal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most books provided by school and class budgets; some funding of reward books from parents' monthly book club purchases; a few purchased from retail stores</li> <li>• Teachers borrowed books from school library</li> <li>• Books mostly supported curriculum; read aloud to children; voluntary reading</li> <li>• Students were taken to the school library to borrow books and for story times</li> </ul>
School libraries (interviews with school library 1 and 2 staff, volunteer)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School library 1: funding from school budget only; school library 2: funding from school budget, profits from parents' and students' purchases at book fairs, birthday book donations</li> <li>• Books from various suppliers; reward books from book fair sales</li> <li>• Books to support classroom curriculum and some recreational reading; teacher and student borrowing; read aloud to visiting classes</li> <li>• Teachers suggested books for the library to support curriculum</li> <li>• Have had ties to public library</li> <li>• School library 1 had discard sale to students</li> </ul>
Public library (interviews with 2 librarians)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection based on a balanced collection; popular demand; curriculum support and teachers' requests; requests from parents and children, often for books read in class or in monthly book club flyers</li> <li>• Books borrowed; books read aloud at story time; books recommended for early literacy; summer reading club; tours</li> <li>• Discard sales</li> </ul>
Retail stores, book clubs, and book fairs (7 interviews with retail store staff)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection based on popular demand of various clientele; curriculum support for teachers, teacher-librarians, and parents in the independent bookstore and chain educational store; discounted remainders; what is brought in for resale in local chain used bookstore</li> <li>• Sales staff sometimes recommend or display titles</li> </ul>

Note: Not all comments apply to all venues in each group.

comments from the teachers from preschool 2 and the Grade 1 classroom that books read to the students became preferred choices. Both librarians also noted that one part of collection development was to supplement the provincial curriculum, adding further ties to the elementary schools.

The retail stores were an occasional source of books for the classrooms and care centres of the study neighbourhood. Preschools 2 and 3, out-of-school care centre 2, and the kindergarten teacher listed occasional purchases from a range of mostly moderately priced retail outlets. As stores carry what customers will buy, these purchases along with those by parents likely influenced the selection offered in the stores. Indeed, elementary curricular requirements shaped the selection of stock in two of the stores that provided interviews. The staff from the independent bookstore listed teachers, school library staff, and homeschoolers as valuable clientele and commented that much of the store's non-fiction inventory was aimed at the elementary curriculum. As well, she noted that parents bought mostly stories, and these were seen as appropriate for learning to read. The chain educational store's stock was also curriculum-based materials for teachers, early childhood educators, and parents.

In turn, the retail stores could also influence what customers buy through their displays. In a study of buying children's books in Canadian bookstores ([Canadian Publishers' Council 1999](#)), displays and face-front shelf presentation accounted for 70% of purchases, and in the study neighbourhood retail displays were 97% stories, with 11 informational topics represented ([Larkin-Lieffers 2013](#)). As well, participants from the chain educational store, the independent book and gift store, and the chain discount department store all commented that in their view the informational books were less interesting than the stories, and they may have recommended the latter.

Of interest, no venue bought books from online sources. In contrast, the monthly book clubs were a major source of books for day care 3 and preschools 2 and 3, and were mentioned as well in the kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. Book fairs were also a major source of funds and books for school library 2, and to a lesser extent for day care 3 and out-of-school care centre 2. They were also sources of book purchases for parents and children.

The role of parental spending on books through monthly book clubs, book fairs, and retail outlets was a major factor, through several channels, in determining the selection and movement of books in some of the neighbourhood venues. Day care 3 and preschools 2 and 3 all had substantial collections as the parents' generous support of the monthly book club programs provided a large number of free reward books. The kindergarten and Grade 1 teachers received free books of their choice for their classrooms through book club sales as well. Day care 3 also benefited from book fair sales, while in school library 2 parents' and children's spending at the book fair contributed significantly to the collections budget, along with the monies from birthday book donations. The non-profit day care 3 and preschools 2 and 3 received donations from parents and other adults of used books. Out-of-school care centre 2 also reported considerable donations of books. Parents' reselling of books to the used book store determined the

store's selection, and the manager noted that he did not get many non-fiction titles.

The venues, then, not only determined their own collections but also shaped in part the collections in other neighbourhood venues through purchases, donations, borrowing, lending, requests, recommendations, and influence. These ecological interrelationships likely tended to strengthen the neighbourhood dominance of stories as most venues offered mostly stories, many stories were donated, and several venues increased the imbalance of genres through promotion of or favoured access to stories. The range of informational topics available to beginning readers in some of the venues was also affected by the demand and movement of curricular materials, while recreational titles were less available.

### **Limitations of the study and areas for further research**

While care was taken to study a neighbourhood that conformed to census tract median-household-income values, the findings may not be reflective of all median-household-income neighbourhoods and therefore may not be broadly generalized. As well, the day cares, preschools, out-of-school care centres, school classrooms and libraries, and the public library may not be average or typical of these venues in other similar neighbourhoods; the kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms in particular had a wide variation in their collections. Nor may the venue staff's comments be consistent with the views of their counterparts elsewhere. While the retail survey was more comprehensive in its coverage and chain stores are very similar across locales, the merchandise in stores would likely be adjusted to some degree in other neighbourhoods to maximize sales. The findings of the study should thus be considered an example of a median-household-income neighbourhood rather than a definitive picture (Patton 2002).

The counts of the books should be considered approximate. In the retail stores, sampling times may have coincided with low stock availability, thus giving a distorted view of what is usually available for sale. September and Christmas stock was not sampled to avoid an overabundance of school materials (dictionaries, atlases, etc.) and Christmas-themed stories. However, books are popular presents, and the holiday selection is worthy of attention. The retail market is also in constant fluctuation with selection continually adjusted to market conditions. Some books in the libraries were missing because they had been borrowed, though efforts were made to minimize inaccuracies. The preschool 1 and Grade 1 teachers did not allow access to books in storage, but the Grade 1 teachers' comments suggested that the proportion of stories and informational books was probably consistent with the scan, while the preschool teacher likely had proportionately more stories. In the day cares and preschools, the themes of the week may alter the balance of stories and informational books made available for the children. The tallies are therefore one snapshot in time and should be considered illustrative of trends rather than a fixed count. As well, although the scans were done thoroughly, given the large volume of books there may be errors in counting and assigning age categories. Categorizing the informational topics

was also subjective at times, as some titles could be categorized in more than one topic.

The elementary schools that offered immersion or bilingual programming along with regular English programming were omitted, and thus some children's experiences have not been included. Since many venues, particularly in the retail sector and the care centres, did not provide interviews, some of the analysis is necessarily conjecture and points to the need for further investigation into this aspect of children's reading worlds. Reading materials other than books, such as magazines and educational sticker books, were not included in the study but are also a small but important component of the reading choices and are worthy of study.

As an initial investigation, this study points to further areas of inquiry to understand children's neighbourhood reading worlds. Reasons for the venue staff's choices (beyond easy availability and curriculum requirements) such as the possible influence of teachers' and other staff's personal reading preferences (e.g., [Summers 2013](#)), assumptions of what is most appropriate for children (e.g., [Pappas 1991](#)), misperceptions of what children like ([Chapman et al. 2007](#)), and popular culture may shed light on the selections. As parents influence the selection of books not only in home collections but in some public venues as well, their perspectives on books for young children, their choices and the affordability of books for sale, library borrowing practices, and the like would add to an understanding of this issue. More studies of parent and child activities and interactions, both in libraries, such as [Ward and Wason-Ellam's \(2005\)](#) ethnographic study and [Shenton and Dixon's \(2004\)](#) investigation of children finding non-fiction, and in retail stores, would add insight into how book selections are negotiated. Data collected on the number and genre of books donated by parents to venues, bought by staff at library sales, borrowed from the libraries, and read to children by teachers and librarians would strengthen the evidence for interrelatedness of the venues. As well, studies of the home collections of young children (e.g., [McKechnie 2004](#)) and what they prefer would add the private dimension to an understanding of their reading worlds.

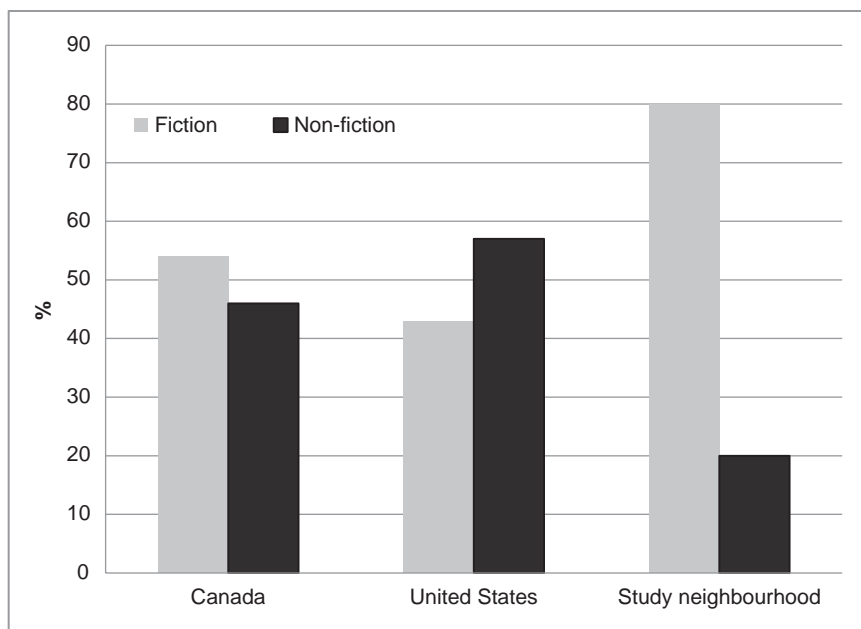
### **Discussion: What children would find in their neighbourhood reading world**

The supply of books for young children in the study's median-household-income neighbourhood is extensive, particularly compared to examples of low-income neighbourhoods in other studies listed earlier in this article. For example, there were well over 5,000 titles available for young children in the 18 retail stores of the study neighbourhood, compared to 358 and 55 titles for all children (younger than the teen years) in the four stores in each of the two low-income neighbourhoods of [Neuman and Celano's \(2001\)](#) study. The school libraries in the two low-income neighbourhoods in their study provided 12.9 and 10.6 books per student, while the two middle-income neighbourhood school libraries provided 18.9 and 25.65 books per student; these figures compare to this study's 47.6 and 74.1 books per student (kindergarten to Grade 6) in the two

school libraries. [Duke \(2000\)](#) found a mean of 449 books and magazines in her low socio-economic first grade classroom libraries, while the high socio-economic first grade classrooms had a mean of 738 books. This study's Grade 1 classroom had 2,418 books.

The large numbers of books and of venues that provide them attest to the importance that the adults in the study neighbourhood placed on early literacy and the provision of books to support beginning readers. This emphasis, however, was mostly centred on stories. The neighbourhood's ratio of stories to informational books for four- to eight-year-olds was striking compared to R. R. [Bowker's \(2012\)](#) more equal proportions of fiction and non-fiction books in print for this age group in the Canadian and American markets in 2009, the year this study began ([figure 1](#)).

Stories continue to be the strongly favoured genre for the youngest children in almost all of the day cares and preschools, as previously found by [Pentimonti and colleagues' \(2010\)](#) study of preschool read-alouds. Only the teacher in preschool 3 commented on using both genres in her programming. Children would find that the selection of informational books in the day cares and in preschools 1 and 2 was limited and tended to cluster in the topics generally found in theme programming for this age group. The likelihood of read-alouds with informational



*Figure 1: Percentage of fiction and non-fiction books in print for ages four to eight in the Canadian and American markets in 2009 (R. R. [Bowker 2012](#)) compared to the findings in the study neighbourhood*

books is low, thus limiting practice in genre familiarity and subject knowledge (Pentimonti, Zucker, and Justice 2011).

For school-age children, the classrooms showed an improvement in access to informational books compared to Duke's (2000) and Pressley, Rankin, and Yokoi's (1996) earlier findings of a scarcity of these materials in primary classrooms, and the study's Grade 1 numbers are closer to the results of the more recent studies by Jeong, Gaffney, and Choi (2010) and Ness (2011). While the Grade 1 teachers used stories extensively and considered them to be the appropriate materials for first teaching reading, informational books were used for subject lessons, and later in the year the children were given instruction on how to read them. Although the school libraries carried 79% stories for this age group, the presence of age-appropriate informational books in many topics also indicates a positive shift in both collection strategy and the availability of non-fiction for younger children compared to Palmer and Stewart's (2003) findings. The strength of these collections was focused for the most part on curricular subjects, with books on some of the more popular recreational topics such as animals, arts and crafts, and dinosaurs and prehistoric animals. While some students would be interested in these topics, others who enjoy books on computers, dance, trucks, cars, motorcycles, or other non-school topics (Worthy, Moorman, and Turner 1999) would likely miss out on reading about their favourite pastimes. Furthermore, and significantly, in these two libraries access to the Dewey-catalogued non-fiction collection was restricted at times for young children, echoing similar findings in Palmer and Stewart's (2003) work. Stories were thus more plentiful and more accessible, while access to informational books, a significant component of preferred reading for some children, was limited and downplayed.

The public library's displays, literacy initiative, story times, and library design favoured stories. The early literacy pamphlets encouraged parents to choose and check off the storybooks in the list, while the displays (Larkin-Lieffers 2013) and story times highlighted mostly stories. The youth services librarian commented that in her experience parents chose stories for their beginning readers most of the time. For the children, the open box shelving of the storybooks and their location near the comfortable furniture, toys, and computers encouraged browsing, while the Dewey-catalogued non-fiction was located several shelves away and out of visual sight lines for supervising parents (Larkin-Lieffers 2001). The Dewey shelving bookends also held the books tight and made browsing more laborious.

The effect of socio-economic status on the collections of books in various neighbourhood public places has been discussed in past studies (e.g., Constantino 2005; Di Loreto and Tse 1999; Duke 2000; Neuman and Celano 2001). This study documents that the parents' financial situations contributed directly and significantly to a disparity of reading opportunities in the study neighbourhood's public places through an array of pathways, and this in turn likely contributed to a concurrent disparity in access to informational books. Parental purchases from monthly book clubs and book fairs were a significant factor in the proportionately larger and broader collections in the non-profit day care 3,

non-profit preschools 2 and 3, and school library 2 through book and cash rewards. These purchases may also become possible donations of used books back to the venue collections. The two for-profit day cares without these programs had significantly smaller and more limited collections and few informational topics. As well, the more disposable income the parents had, the better the retail selection they could afford, and the more books they might have to donate. Those parents who shopped at the more expensive independent or big-box bookstores would have a wider range of informational topics to choose from should they want an informational book. Those who shopped at the popular, more moderately priced chain department, chain department and grocery, chain discount, and chain warehouse club stores and at the chain mall bookstore ([Canadian Publishers' Council 2005](#)) would likely be purchasing and then donating more stories or informational books on only the most popular topics such as animals and characters from television and movies. Individual children's reading opportunities may thus vary widely depending on the neighbourhood's public places the children and their parents do, or do not, visit. This situation was partially alleviated by the public library with its more comprehensive collection of both school-related and recreational informational books; however, young children are dependent on adults to provide access to the library and to help find resources.

A troubling postscript to the study is a shift to an even smaller selection of informational books on fewer topics in the retail stores. A recent revisiting of these venues in 2014 showed that the independent bookstore and the independent book and gift store have closed, the chain big-box bookstore has reallocated its merchandise selection to fewer informational books although their inventory of stories has remained constant, and chain grocery store 2 has greatly reduced its inventory of books. While the neighbourhood selection of stories was also reduced by the changes, these venues were the significant retail sources of high-quality informational books on a range of topics. Although more study is needed, there was no obvious evidence that other stores are compensating for this loss, and children and parents who look to purchase informational books for home reading likely will not find an adequate supply of topics. Knowing whether parents are compensating for this lack of choice, such as by purchasing books online, would add to the discussion. As well, given the focus in the classrooms, school libraries, and out-of-school care centre 3 on mostly curricular topics and the limits on borrowing in the school libraries, the perceived value of at-home reading of informational books on recreational topics of the children's choice may be further diminished. A minor improvement is the public library's recent addition of a few informational titles to its early literacy resource list, with 8% of the titles now non-fiction.

Given the dominance of stories in the neighbourhood venues and the limited selection of informational books particularly for recreational reading, the crucial role the school and public libraries can play in providing a varied and accessible selection for the neighbourhood's children becomes evident. For some children, the school library is their only source of at-home reading materials;

broader borrowing privileges in both numbers and genres of books would open the selection to its full potential within the budget limitations of curricular support. Programs, displays, and readings of informational books in the public library could highlight their value to both parents and the neighbourhood venues that borrow from the library. Library design in both school and public libraries could be modified to enhance access to age-appropriate informational books. Educational research has stressed the importance for beginning readers to have the opportunity to read a wide assortment of stories and informational books in both formal school and recreational reading time, and the neighbourhood libraries have opportunities to play a major role in determining these reading opportunities. More action is needed to promote the value and importance of a range of genres to optimize the reading opportunities that beginning readers need and deserve.

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