FIRST GRADERS' PREFERENCES FOR NARRATIVE AND/OR INFORMATION BOOKS AND PERCEPTIONS OF OTHER BOYS' AND GIRLS' BOOK PREFERENCES

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In this article, we report on grade-one children's preferences for narrative and/or information books, and their perceptions of what boys and girls like to read. Data include responses on two book preference tasks by 40 children in four schools. Children chose books and explained the reasons for their choices. One task was a closed, force-choice task, the other, an open-ended task. Boys and girls had similar interests, either preferring stories or liking information books and stories to the same degree. Yet boys and girls perceived that boys prefer information texts and girls prefer narratives. The children's perceptions reflect gendered stereotypes.

Key words: literacy, reading, motivation, genre, gender

Dans cet article, les auteurs signalent que les élèves de 1re année préfèrent les livres qui racontent des histoires ou donnent de l'information et présentent ce que, selon de ces élèves, les garçons et les filles aiment lire. Les données comprennent les réponses de 40 enfants dans quatre écoles à deux questionnaires, l'un à réponses libres et l'autre à choix multiples, sur les préférences en matière de livres. Les enfants ont choisi des livres et donné les raisons de leur choix. Les garçons et les filles avaient des intérêts similaires, préférant soit les histoires, soit les livres d'information et les histoires au même degré. Et pourtant, les garçons comme les filles avaient l'impression que les garçons aimaient mieux les livres d'information et les filles, les histoires. Les perceptions des enfants reflètent les stéréotypes marqués par le sexe.

Mots clés : littératie, lecture, motivation, genre

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In the current political climate, there is much concern about literacy achievement, especially for boys. A frequently offered recommendation to foster boys' success in literacy has been to provide more opportunities to read nonfiction, especially in the critical early years. The argument has been that, although reading informational text is beneficial for all children, it is especially critical to boys' motivation to read.

Narrative genres have been dominant in primary classrooms because they were considered most appropriate for young children. More recently, researchers such as Pappas (1993) and Doiron (1994) have challenged the primacy of narrative in the early years, arguing that children's difficulties reading informational genres are due to limited experience with them rather than innate developmental differences. Some scholars suggest that the dominance of narrative texts may be contributing to an "expository gap" at about grade four (Gee, 2001) and the persistent "fourth grade slump" in overall literacy achievement (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin, 1990). Hall (1998) argues that a consistent diet of personal and fictional stories rather the genres they will use in later schooling and in their adult lives "divorces school literacy from real-life literacy" (p. 10).

Some scholars (Levine & Geldman-Caspar, 1996; Worthy, Moorman & Turner, 1999) have considered informational reading to be important to motivate and engage readers, especially for boys. Millard (1997) suggests the focus on narrative in schools may promote "particular versions of literacy that have more appeal for girls than boys" (p. 22). Other researchers (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995; Shapiro & White, 1991) indicate that children's attitudes toward reading and writing become more negative as they progress through the elementary school grades, with boys declining even more than girls. Interest leads to increased engagement, which is important for its own sake but also because it improves achievement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). From this research on reading achievement, educators have concluded that providing a variety of genres in children's reading in the primary grades has important consequences both cognitively and affectively.

Asselin (2003) reiterates a common assumption: "What typically comes to mind when considering boys and reading? Any thoughts are likely framed as contrasts to girls and reading. Girls read fiction, boys

read nonfiction" (p. 53). Such generalizations are based on an essentialist perspective, "the belief that there are some *essential* and *natural* differences between boys and girls" (Rowan, Knobel, Bigum & Lankshear, 2002, p. 29, emphasis in the original). Essentialists see boys' interest in reading for information and girls' interest in narrative as biologically determined. Anti-essentialists, on the other hand, argue that differences between boys' and girls' genre preferences are socially constructed within particular social and cultural contexts; they are not innate or natural.

Social constructivism, a theory originating in sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), proposes that the meanings readers create about the world are the result of social interaction, through talking with other people, and living in a cultural context that conveys meanings to them. As Hare-Mustin (1994) puts it: "Meanings are not inherent in objects or particular situations, rather we make meanings out of what we experience through interactions with others" (p. 20). Henderson (1994) observes that "the meaning of gender is constructed by society, and each of us is socialized into that construction. Thus, gender is a set of socially constructed relationships which are produced and reproduced through people's actions" (p. 121). Similarly, sex-role stereotyping is the result of mutual definitions and meaning making within a given society. Viewing gender as socially constructed differs from traditional approaches, which tend to focus either on differences between the sexes or assume that there are no differences between them (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988).

According to this view, preferences for one genre over another result from socialization, which creates a homogenization of children's gendered literate identities and reinforces traditional notions of what normal boys and girls like to read. Children's views of appropriate reading materials are influenced by their immediate social worlds – parents, siblings, and peers (e.g., Smith, 2004) as well as cultural images, including popular culture and media (Dyson, 2003).

Research with older boys shows that, although they read more fiction than nonfiction overall, the latter is a significant portion of their reading diet (Hall & Coles, 1999). There is little extant literature about whether gender differences occur in younger children's genre preferences, nor inquiries into young children's perceptions about the

relationships between gender and genre. In this study we fill this gap in the research literature through an investigation of genre preferences within a group of grade-one children, and also their perceptions of what other boys and girls of the same age like to read.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The data for this study are part of a larger longitudinal quasi-experimental study, Young Children's Informational Literacy (YCIL), in which we provided information books for each classroom and asked teachers to incorporate informational reading and writing experiences into their instructional program.[1] Our data for this article come from the first year of this study in which we considered in-depth the responses of focal boys and girls We used the following questions to guide this study:

- Do first grade children prefer narrative or information books? Does gender contribute to differences in their preferences?
- What are first graders' perceptions of what other first-grade boys and girls like to read (stories or information books)? What are the gender differences in their perceptions?
- Does reading ability (high, average, low) affect children's book preferences for themselves or their perceptions of what other boys and girls like to read?
- What reasons do first-grade boys and girls give for their own book preferences and for their perceptions of other first-grade boys and girls' book preferences?

METHOD

Subjects

Eleven classrooms enrolling grade-one children in four different schools participated in the YCIL study. All schools drew from working-class communities. The school populations represent the linguistic diversity found in most schools in urban school districts in the Greater Vancouver area. We used a number of standardized early literacy measures, together with teacher judgment, to organize the children into high, middle, and low groupings by reading ability. The measures included the Word Reading Test, List A, and Dictation Task, Form A, from Clay's

(1993) *Observation Survey*; two writing samples from regular classroom activities, coded with Clays' writing criteria (p. 57); and the *Developmental Reading Assessment, K-3* (Beaver, 2001), which schools in the district were using.

We then used stratified random sampling to select up to six focal children from the classrooms (three boys, three girls from each of the three ability levels). Six children were selected from straight grade-1 classes, and two to four students from the K-1 or grade-1 and -2 classrooms, in proportion to the number of first-grade children. In all, we selected 40 focal children to engage in two book selection tasks and interviews about the reasons for their selections.

Data Collection

We conducted the book preference tasks and interviews at the beginning of January, before the classrooms were provided with the information books that were part of the larger study. There were two separate book selection tasks, with books that we thought would appeal to young children. We also tried to choose books that were similar in number and quality of visuals and text difficulty. We avoided books that we thought the children would perceive as suited to one gender or the other, such as books about hockey or ballet, and instead selected topics we thought they would perceive as more gender-neutral such as animals, gardens, and school.

For each task, we showed each child a set of books and encouraged them to examine and explore the set. Children were asked first to choose books they would like for school or home reading, if they had the opportunity to do so. We then asked children to indicate choices for themselves, for a girl, and for a boy, and to tell us the reasons for their choices. We next showed the children a photograph of a first-grade girl, granddaughter of the principal investigator, and a first-grade boy, her grandson. The children were told that the children's grandmother would like their opinions on books that would be good presents for their upcoming birthdays.

In the Open (Free Choice) Task, children were shown four information books and four storybooks, selected so that there was an information book and a storybook on each of four topics. Children could

choose as many books as they wanted (a maximum of eight). Open-task books included:

- Stories: *I Wish I Were a Butterfly* (Howe, 1987), *The Gardener* (Stewart, 1997), *David Goes to School* (Shannon, 1999), and *Snow Bear* (Harper, 2002);
- Information books: *Life Cycle of a Butterfly* (Royston, 1998), *Jack's Garden* (Cole, 1995), *Fraction Action* (Leedy, 1994), and *Polar Bears* (Tagliaferro, 2002).

In the Closed (forced-choice) Task, children chose either the story or information book on the same topic from four pairs of books, including:

- *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* (Trapani, 1993) and *Spiders* (Kalman & Smithyman, 2002);
- *Froggy Goes to Bed* (London, 2000) and *Life Cycle of a Frog* (Royston, 2000);
- *The Very Lazy Ladybug* (Finn & Tickle, 1999) and *Ladybug* (Hartley & Macro, 1998);
- *Daisy and the Egg* (Simmons, 1998) and *Watch Me Grow: Duckling* (Magloff, 2003).

We used a record sheet during the tasks/interviews and also audiotaped them. Two researchers participated in each book selection task and interview to allow one to focus on the child and the other to focus on the record keeping.

Analyses of Children's Choices for Themselves, for Boys, and for Girls

Children's choices for themselves, for boys, and for girls, were coded separately for open and closed tasks as follows:

- We first tallied the information books and storybooks selected. For the open task we also tallied the total number of books each child chose.
- We then calculated how many storybooks and information books were chosen in all for the group of 20 boys and the group of 20 girls.

- For each of the open and closed tasks we then coded, for each child, either a preference for stories (i.e., they chose more narrative than information books); a preference for informational text; or no preference (i.e., they chose an equal number of stories and information books).
- Next, we tallied the number of children who selected more information books or more storybooks on the open and closed tasks (separately).

These analyses revealed that some children showed a preference for one genre on the open task, but the other genre on the closed task, while some children selected both genres equally on one or both of the tasks. To analyze the results across both open and closed tasks, we arrayed children's preferences on a continuum, from "strongly prefers stories" (chose more stories on both tasks) to "strongly prefers information books" (chose more of these texts on both tasks). To determine genre preferences for children of differing ability levels within each gender, we then analyzed the data in the same way for high, middle, and low achieving boys, and high, middle, and low achieving girls.

Analyses of Children's Reasons for their Choices for Themselves, for Boys, and for Girls

We used the comments from the record sheets and the audiotapes together to prepare transcripts for the analyses of children's oral responses, using utterance as the unit of analysis. (An utterance is a natural unit of speech bounded by pauses. In dialogue, each turn that a speaker takes may be considered an utterance.) Children's responses to the question "Why did you choose this book?" were analyzed separately for choices for their own reading, choices for other boys, and choices for other girls.

We used a constant-comparative method (Silverman, 2001), categorizing children's responses, until all data were accounted for. In identifying the themes in children's responses, we drew on our collective knowledge of criteria for selecting children's books, such as visual appeal, topic, and humour (supported by researchers such as Wilhelm, 2000). We also drew on our experiences in sharing literature with

children and our previous research into children's talk about narrative and informational text, predicting possible categories as "comments on observations" about the books and connections to personal experience. Using these ideas as springboards, one member of the research team derived the initial set of categories arising from the data, which was then revised with input from other team members. Next, we used a subset of 100 responses, which included all eight categories, to establish inter-rater reliability, which was strong (94%). We then calculated a frequency distribution based on the percentage of comments in each category.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children's Reading Preferences and Their Perceptions of the Preferences of Other Boys and Girls

Our data do not support the oft-stated assumption that boys prefer information books and girls prefer storybooks. Table 1 shows the total number of choices for the group of 20 boys and 20 girls interviewed. In general, the group scores show a trend towards boys' preference for storybooks for their own reading choices. Boys chose fewer books overall, and fewer information books, for their own reading than did the girls. Girls' choices for themselves on the two tasks were quite different: the open task eliciting similar numbers of stories and information books, the closed task indicating a strong preference for stories. These data are similar to studies reported by Kletzien (1999): some primary children prefer stories, some prefer information text, and many children like both.

These first-grade children's perceptions of what other boys and girls like to read reflect gender stereotypical ideas. The boys chose considerably more stories than information books for girls, and the reverse for boys, indicating a perception that other boys prefer to read information books and that girls prefer stories. Like the boys, the girls also thought that boys prefer information books and that girls prefer stories. The discrepancy between boys' own preferences (tending towards storybooks) and their perception of what other boys like to read

*Table 1: Frequency Distribution of Children's Choices for Themselves,
for Boys, and for Girls*

Number of Books Chosen	Open Task		Closed Task	
	Storybook Max. 80	Info. Book Max. 80	Storybook Max. 80	Info. Book Max. 80
BOYS (n=20)				
1. Choices for self	33	25	48	32
2. Choices for girls	31	18	63	17
3. Choices for boys	19	25	30	50
GIRLS (n=20)				
1. Choices for self	37	36	61	19
2. Choices for girls	36	26	45	35
3. Choices for boys	25	32	35	45

(information books) is particularly intriguing. It appears that boys' perceptions of what other boys like to read is based not on generalizations from their own reading preferences, but from a socially constructed understanding. Furthermore, although they have already acquired the notion that boys like to read information books, this understanding does not seem to have had a limiting effect on their own reading behaviour in grade one, as evidenced by their independent reading records. The discrepancy between girls' choices for themselves and other girls was not as strongly marked.

Table 2 shows the number of boys and girls who have preferences on both tasks for one genre over the other.   These data confirm some of the findings shown in Table 1: more boys preferred stories to information books for their own reading, and perceived that boys prefer information books and that girls prefer stories. On the open task, slightly more girls selected information books for themselves, yet dramatically more stories (15:1) in the forced-choice task. These findings suggest that the type of book selection task influences the outcome: closed-book selection tasks may make children's preferences appear stronger than they actually are. For example, in the free-choice situation a child may choose both books because she or he likes them both, whereas the child is forced to choose

between them in a closed task. An alternative possibility is that forced-choice tasks might tap into children's socially constructed notions of gender and genre.

*Table 2: Individual Analyses of Children's Choices for Themselves,
and for Boys and Girls*

Number of Children	Preference on Open Task		Preference on Closed Task	
	Storybook	Information Book	Storybook (3-4)	Info. Book (3-4)
BOYS (n=20)				
1. Choices for self	7	5	7	5
2. Choices for girls	11	4	15	1
3. Choices for boys	6	8	4	11
GIRLS (n=20)				
1. Choices for self	7	9	15	1
2. Choices for girls	11	4	12	6
3. Choices for boys	3	6	5	8

Children's preferences for storybooks or information books for their own reading can be conceived of as a continuum from a strong preference for storybooks, to a strong preference for information books, as shown in Table 3. As described earlier, to arrive at these figures, we calculated whether there was a strong or moderate preference for one genre on each task, or whether there was an indication that a child liked both stories and information books equally. As Table 3 shows, half the boys and half the girls had either a strong or moderate preference for storybooks whereas three out of eight girls liked stories and information books equally. Only a small number of children preferred information books, with little difference in genre preferences between boys and girls. Thus, the perception that boys and girls prefer different genres, at least in first grade, is not supported by these data.

Our analyses showed no relationship between reading ability and children's book choices. As Table 4 shows, both children who showed strong preferences for information books were of high ability (one boy,

one girl). None of the children at middle- and low-ability levels showed a strong preference for information books. Average children of both genders tended to prefer stories, whereas low-ability boys tended to like both genres equally and low-ability girls tended either to like them equally or show a strong preference for stories. These findings echo those of Smith (2004), who used a book selection task as part of her longitudinal case study of six young proficient boy readers, aged 5-7. The children's reading interests were similar to other boys of the same age; ability did not make a difference.

Table 3: Individual Children's Genre Preferences

Number of Children	Preference for Storybooks		Likes Both Equally	Preference for Information Books	
	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong
Boys	4	6	7	2	1
Girls	5	5	8	1	1
Boys & Girls	9	11	15	3	2

Table 4: Individual Children's Genre Preferences by Ability Level

Number of Children (Gender & Ability)	Preference for Storybooks		Likes Both Equally	Preference for Information Books	
	Strong	Moderate		Moderate	Strong
Boys –H (6)	2	1	2		1
Boys-M (8)	2	4	1	1	
Boys-L (6)		1	4	1	
All Boys	10		7	3	
Girls-H (5)		2	2		1
Girls-M (7)	2	3	2		
Girls-L (8)	3		4	1	
All Girls	10		8	2	

Children's Reasons for Their Book Choices for Themselves and Others

Eight themes or categories emerged from data on children's oral responses in which they explained the reasons for their choices: visual appeal, topic interest, humour, literary judgment, tactile quality, gender, observations (about the book), and connections (to experience). All eight categories were found in the boys' and girls' talk, and in response both to stories and information books. (See Table 5.)

Boys' and girls' comments about choosing books for others reflected similar responses to the books in the selection tasks when choosing for themselves, as shown in Table 6. (An analysis of distribution of categories of response according to genre are provided in two additional tables, Table 7: Children's Comments on Storybooks, and Table 8, Children's Comments on Information books, in the Appendix.) All children were drawn to books for reasons of visual and tactile appeal, topic, humour, and literary merit (awards). The children also perceived that these features would be appealing to other boys and girls. Overall, boys made more comments related to specific observations and connections to experience. Some of the boys' comments about features of books they liked are similar to those identified by Wilhelm (2000): visual appeal, interest in topic, and humour. As Wilhelm observed: It's not the text type (nonfiction) that engages boys so much as certain features of texts, such as visuals and topic of interest, features which allow readers to make connections to the world. Our data support Wilhelm's observation. Indeed, our data show that the children did not use genre as a criterion, at least explicitly, in choosing the books.

Table 5: Categories of Children's Oral Responses to the Books

Eight themes or categories emerged from data on children's oral responses:
*Category 1, Visual Appea*l: Comments in this category referred to visual features of the books, for example, illustrations (medium, color, position), font, paper, and so on. Children identified a broad range of comments referring to a book's visual appeal, such as "Lots of pictures; bright, bold, clear writing," and "The pictures are interesting; so many ants."

Category 2, Topic Interest: Comments in this category included references to interest in some aspect of the topic of the book. Again, we noted a broad range of children's comments referring to their interest in a book's topic, such as, "It tells about winter and how bears sleep," and "I like to learn about spiders."

Category 3, Humour: In general, comments in this category referred to liking the book or choosing the book for another child (boy or girl) because of its humour. Comments included, "He [David] does funny stuff," and "It will make you laugh"; however, the majority of the comments were simply that the book was "funny!" Story and information books both elicited comments about humour.

*Category 4, Award/Merit***:** Children's comments in this category referred either directly to the fact that the book was an award winner (e.g., Caldecott Award) or to some aspect of its literary merit. Examples of comments include: "It has an award!" "My sister likes books with prizes!" "Because it has a badge!"

Category 5, Tactile Quality: Two books used in the selection task (*Snow Bear* and *Spiders)* had illustrations that were raised or included soft fabric. Thus, these books elicited comments about the tactile nature of the illustrations, for example, "It's soft!" "Feels nice!" "It's really nice and furry!" "It feels sticky!" "The web feels like a real web!" Comments were limited to observations about the softness of illustrations or the web-like qualities of illustrations.

Category 6, Gender: Children's comments in this category referred specifically to gender. Boys made comments that included, "Women like to plant stuff!" and "Boys aren't scared of spiders!" Like the boys, the girls made various gender stereotypical comments, such as "Boys like icky stuff!" and "They're [girls] scared of them [spiders]"). These comments support a social constructivist perspective on gender, which we discuss in the next section.

Category 7, Observation: This was the largest category of comments, descriptive observations of specific aspects of the illustrations. Our observations of comments about information books included, "There's lots of ladybugs in it!" "Antennas are going down!" "The page shows you under the ground." Observations of responses to storybooks included comments such as "Food fight!" "It shows him sleeping," "Froggy doesn't want to take a bath," and "He's lazy. He jumps on animals and gets off." Children's comments in this category appear to reflect their engagement with specific aspects of the content of the book.

Category 8, Connection: Children's comments in this category reflected their connections between their personal experiences and the content of the books. For example, while browsing *Jack's Garden*, one girl identified that "I have a garden!" While looking at *I Wish I Were a Butterfly*, a boy commented "I have a butterfly pet at home!" and while looking at *A Very Lazy Ladybug*, another boy commented, "I'm lazy and my brother, Ryan, is too!"

Table 6: Children's Comments Across Open and Closed Tasks

Percentage of Comments	Boys' Comments on Choices Across Open and Closed Tasks			Girls' Comments on Choices Across Open and Closed Tasks		
	For Self	For Girls	For Boys	For Self	For Girls	For Boys
Visual	14	15	4	16	15	12
Topic	18	13	19	26	31	41
Humour	10	14	11	12	11	10
Merit/Awards	18	12	15	21	11	10
Tactile	10	9	6	9	6	3
Gender	0	11	9	1	5	7
Observation	22	24	31	11	17	16
Connections	8	2	5	4	2	1
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

The books used in the selection tasks influenced children's responses, and thus the categories emerging from the data. For example, two of the books (*Snow Bear*, a storybook with a fuzzy, flocked bear on the cover and illustrations; and *Spiders*, an information book with sticky, rubbery spider web on the cover) encouraged tactile responses. Similarly, the book with an award sticker on the cover (*The Gardener)* elicited comments about awards and literary merit. Different books, with pop-ups for example, or on different topics would likely have evoked a somewhat different set of comments. (We deliberately chose not to use pop-up books because we have previously noted children's fascination with this type of feature.) Nevertheless, it was interesting that both boys and girls clearly liked aspects of books that might be attributed (gender-stereotypically) as more attractive to one gender or the other (e.g., the soft illustrations in *Snow Bear* might attract girls more

than boys) were appealing to both boys and girls. It was also interesting to see that both boys and girls in this first-grade sample were informed about award winning books, enjoyed humour, and liked books with strong visual appeal.

Most intriguing were the gender-related statements. Although the boys made stereotypical comments when making choices for a girl or a boy (e.g., "Women like to plant stuff!" and "Boys aren't scared of spiders!"), they made no such remarks about their own choices. The boys' gender comments are consistent with their book choices discussed earlier: they had constructed notions of gender and reading that influenced their decisions in choosing books for other children, yet they had not (yet) taken on these ideas in relation to their own reading.

Like the boys, the girls made various gender stereotypical remarks when choosing books for others; only two gender stereotypical comments were made about choices for themselves. The girls' gendered statements are consistent with their book choices and lend support to the assertion that their views of reading are gendered. That two girls who made gendered remarks about themselves might indicate that they are becoming more influenced by socially constructed notions of what is appropriate for them, as girls. We wonder if perhaps this assertion reflects a more general pattern of stronger socialization into girls' particular ways of thinking and acting at any earlier age than boys (an implication by data that show more pro-social behaviour by girls than boys of the same age (Schmidt, Demulder & Denham, 2002; Sebanc, Pierce, Cheatham & Gummar, 2003).

The notion that, as one of the girls said, "boys like gross stuff," and alluded to by Dalhauser (2003) and St. Lifer (2004) was not supported by the data on boys' choices for themselves. Indeed, the boys liked the soft, fuzzy book, *Snow Bear*, as much as the girls did. Yet a number of the girls suggested, for example, that "Boys like icky stuff," when explaining why a boy might like an information book about spiders; and the inverse, "Gross things are not for girls," as a rationale for choosing a storybook about spiders rather than the information book. This is not surprising, given the prevalence of traditional lore such as "Snips and snails and puppy dogs tails, that's what little boys are made of. Sugar and spice and all things nice; that's what little girls are made of."

The children also attributed bravery to boys, but not girls, in conveying their reasons for choices. Boys, in particular, commented on binary opposites, for example, "Boys are brave; girls are not," and "girls don't want to read about scary spiders; boys like scary spiders." This reaction is not surprising because males and females are routinely defined in binary relationship to each other: active/passive, strong/weak, and so on (Rowan et al., 2002). "'Masculinity,'" as Connell (1995) points out, "does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity'" (p. 68). No wonder, then, that so many boys construct a masculine identity as being opposite to girls.

It is evident, then, that these first-grade children attribute characteristics as belonging either to males or females (Davies, 1997), and position reading choices for other boys and girls in relation to gender, though not yet for themselves. Given that these children's choices for themselves were more alike than different, while choices for other children reflected gender-based assumptions, these data provide strong support for the theory that children's conceptions of gender and literacy are socially constructed.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The first-grade children in this study responded in concrete, immediate ways to the narrative and information books in the book preference tasks. They were drawn to particular books because they found features appealing such as visuals, topics, humour, textures, and literary merit (awards). Our experience with and knowledge of young children leads us to believe that hands-on tasks involving real books are critical in accessing children's responses, and that they provide more authentic information than questionnaires that are too abstract for young children. Using the two different types of book selection tasks – open and forced-choice – afforded us an opportunity to compare children's responses. Given the more dramatic differences in response to the forced-choice task suggests that these are less likely to inform researchers about children's actual preferences than open-ended choices. Furthermore, forcing children to choose between two books of different genres tends to promote a more stereotypical, socially constructed response.

This study is limited to the extent that it included only grade-one children who came from working-class families. It would be interesting to conduct similar studies with children across a greater age span, for example, from ages 3 to 11. As well, because the children in this population were from working-class homes, future research should consider gender perceptions across socio-economic levels and rural/urban settings.

Although adults may use text type or genre as an important criterion in book selection, we suggests that the results from this study indicate the importance of adults keeping in mind that to motivate children to read, they need access to books that appeal to them and that allow them to make personal connections. Indeed, such qualities are more important than text type alone (Wilhelm, 2000).

This conclusion does not mean that genre is not important. Children need a varied genre repertoire in the early school years, not just stories, stories, stories. Narratives play an important role in helping a child come to "'know,' have a 'feel' for, the myths, histories, folktales, conventional stories of his or her culture (or cultures). They frame and nourish an identity …" (Bruner, 1996, p. 41), and encourage imagination "that takes him or her into a world of possibilities..." (p. 41).

But information books also play an important role, fostering children's knowledge of their physical, natural, and social worlds, which in turn, contributes to increased comprehension (Neuman, 2001). These books also help children learn much about the language and structures of informational texts (Lemke, 1990), which is critical for success in later schooling. A scarcity of access to informational text is particularly problematic if educators expect children to thrive in an Information Age (Moss, Leone & DiPillo, 1997). As Dreher (2003) notes, "information books are not the only solution [to increase literacy achievement and motivation], but they certainly should be part of it" (p. 34).

The data in this study challenge the assumption that girls in primary grades like storybooks and boys like information books. Rather than using gender as a deciding factor in selecting reading materials for children, teachers and parents need to consider individual children's interests and, at the same time, encourage boys and girls to read a variety of genres for the benefits that accrue from different genres.

Adults also need to become more fully aware of gender stereotyping to avoid limiting boys and girls to particular kinds of literacy experiences based on their gender. Indeed, after analyzing our data, our research team became aware of the extent to which our own stereotyped pre-conceptions influenced our decisions in choosing the books for the book-selection tasks.

These first graders had already constructed gender-stereotyped notions about books that boys and girls like to read, even though their perceptions (especially boys') were not consistent with their own interests. Over time it is possible that these children will self-constrain their reading according to gender-based notions of literacy. We believe that grade one is not too soon to help boys and girls learn to think critically about their reading, to reflect on their choices, to recognize that reading preferences reflect both individual and social factors, and to realize the benefits of reading narrative and information books.

Critical literacy needs to become part of the early years curriculum, to help children, teachers, and parents move beyond normative masculinity and femininity: to understand that there are many ways of "being a girl" and "being a boy," and that not all children experience literacy in the same way. We can also help children understand that although socialization exerts an influence on their ways of thinking about themselves, "they are not necessarily passive recipients of these socializing messages (Rowan et al., 2002, p. 70). Rather than perpetuating the myth that "girls like stories and boys like information books," educators need to take note of Rowan et al's. (2002) conclusion: "that boys – and girls – have the right to access various cultural resources, and to have their use of these resources read as legitimate and appropriate" (p. 66).

NOTES

[1] We collected baseline data at the beginning of the YCIL study to inquire into children's initial reading preferences and perceptions of what other first-grade boys and girls like to read. We also wanted to know if gender and/or reading ability affected children's choices. We plan to repeat the tasks and interviews with the same children at the end of grade three to see whether, and to what degree, increased exposure to informational texts affects their reading preferences and perceptions of what other children like to read.

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APPENDIX A

Table 7

Children's Comments on Storybooks

Percentage of Comments	Boys' Comments on Storybooks Across Open and Closed Tasks			Girls' Comments on Storybooks Across Open and Closed Tasks		
	For Self	For Girls	For Boys	For Self	For Girls	For Boys
Visual	7	14	0	17	18	12
Topic	3	10	2	16	23	29
Humour	10	18	23	16	14	14
Merit/Awards	24	13	11	23	10	12
Tactile	18	13	17	13	11	7
Gender	0	6	4	1	5	9
Observation	26	25	39	11	19	15
Connections	12	1	4	3	0	2
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 8

Children's Comments on Information Books

Percentage of Comments	Boys' Comments on Info Books Across Open and Closed Tasks			Girls' Comments on Info Books Across Open and Closed Tasks		
	For Self	For Girls	For Boys	For Self	For Girls	For Boys
Visual	21	20	9	20	12	11
Topic	46	26	31	48	44	44
Humour	2	4	3	3	6	8
Merit/Awards	12	9	19	14	14	7
Tactile	2	0	0	0	0	0
Gender	0	17	12	0	7	8
Observation	10	24	21	11	14	18
Connections	7	0	5	4	3	4
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%