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Children's Preference in Picture Book Illustration

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PUBLISHERS last year produced 2,640 new books for children (14). Choose the 50 to order for your classroom library—the 90 to add to your library collection—or the 10 to buy for your children! An impossible task? It certainly seems so; and yet teachers, librarians, and parents do it all the time, usually relying with more or less trepidation on either their own intuition or some expert's opinion.

There is little doubt that those responsible for choosing books for children want to bring the *best* books to children, and yet such a task is difficult. It is perhaps even more difficult when one is concerned with picture book selection, because adults generally know even less about the quality of illustrations than they do about the quality of stories.

Yet pictures are often crucial to a book, whether in illustrated books for older children or picture books for younger ones. For as Carroll (4) so delightfully describes one child's reaction:

... once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures ... in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice, "without pictures ...?"

This, we may assume, is an even more

typical reaction of children in our visually-oriented world than in Carroll's more print-oriented one.

Can we choose picture books for children on a more reliable basis than simple intuition? That is, in an era increasingly dominated by empirical research, is there any experimental evidence pointing to what children prefer in book illustration? A reading of the research reported in the following section indicates that often the choices adults made for children were substantially unlike the choices children made for themselves. (See Morrison; French; Waymack and Hendrickson; Bamberger; and Freeman and Freeman.) Apparently simple intuitive judgment is not completely reliable, so an examination of available research was carried out, in an effort to determine what agreement, if any, existed among researchers.

Research on Children's Picture Preferences

Sixteen studies were located which were directly concerned with determining what type of pictures children prefer. For purposes of comparison, all of these are summarized briefly here. It will be immediately apparent to the reader that interest in this

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topic is not new. It was equally apparent to this writer, however, that the recently declining interest in the topic is not justified by unanimity of findings.

Bamberger (2) conducted one of the earliest studies in this area, using a sample of 317 children in grades 1 through 3. Her sample also included 65 teachers in order to compare children's preferences with adult opinions of what children would like. The author found that children prefer books with more than 25 percent of the space in pictures. Large pictures were most popular, as were ones that were in color. "It is also clear that there is less difference between the boys' and girls' selection than exists between the opinions of adults and the children's choices." In addition, she found that younger children preferred rather crude or primary colors, whereas older children preferred softer tints and tones.

Williams (18), another early researcher, described an experiment with 1,000 children who were asked to select the pictures they

liked best in a museum. In general, the children chose the pictures which had been recognized as "good" by adults. In very few cases did pictures of doubtful quality receive votes. Any evaluation of this research must take into account the changing notions of what is considered "good" in art circles.

Welling's (16) study explored the types of illustrations which appeal to the four- to eight-year-old. This author concluded that children's illustrations should be bold, with rounded three-dimensional forms rather than flat or decorative forms. Welling also felt that brilliant color should be applied in not too literal or realistic a way.

Waymack and Hendrickson (15) conducted a study which attempted to analyze both the reaction to pictures made by 2,219 fourth through sixth grade children and their reactions to a new set of pictures after an art appreciation lesson. A unique feature of this study was that in addition to making choices, subjects also wrote briefly the reasons for their choices. The most striking fact is the

lack of agreement between ratings given by juries of teachers and choices made by the children. In the first half of the experiment, children selected pictures largely on the basis of color, prettiness, scenery, and interest in subjects portrayed. After the art appreciation lesson, children's choices did not change significantly, although the reasons they listed in written responses were longer and more analytical.

Mellinger (11) studied two main factors: color preference and realistic style versus conventionalized style. Using first and fifth graders ($N = 795$), she found that realistic pictures were chosen over conventionalized ones. No matter what the style of the pictures was, two-color illustrations were preferred above black and white. In this study, all the renderings were supplied by one artist; they were not actual illustrations taken from books.

According to a study done by the Freemans (6), pictures chosen by a randomly selected group of mothers were found to have appeal to children. In the study of 60 nursery school children, such naturalistic pictures as those of Kate Greenaway were not largely favored because the soft tints, fine shading, and detail seemed confusing. The participants in this study preferred "a crude form." Photographs were found to be most disliked; but in contrast to many other sources, the Freemans found that nursery school children favored small and medium size pictures.

Morrison (13) examined lists of recommended children's books and found that there was no agreement between lists; she also found that children's preferences often were different from those on the lists. She noted that primary children liked a broader range of illustrations than was usually used, and that pictures of children were relatively unimportant to children. Morrison also noted that boys and girls had different preferences even in the primary grades. The interest in types of pictures shifted from grade to grade; story interest was the most frequently mentioned reason for choosing a particular picture.

In Miller's (12) study, photographs of interest to children because of their subject

matter were copied as (a) line drawings, (b) wash drawings, (c) black and white illustrations, (d) full color reproductions in three primary colors, (e) illustrations with red as the predominant color, and (f) illustrations with blue as the predominant color. One hundred children in grades 1 through 3 were asked to select their preferences. In all three grades, children selected full color as their first choice, followed by red predominant, blue predominant, and photographs. Children of higher intelligence preferred color illustrations more frequently than did those with lower intelligence, who expressed a preference for photographs most often. It is interesting to note that as children grew older, their preference for photographs increased.

Reports from 17 teachers, librarians, and researchers interviewing over 1,400 school children up to 14 years of age in various parts of the country provided the sample for a 1939 study sponsored by the Association for Arts in Childhood (5). The results showed that children wanted realistic pictures—especially reality in color.

Malter (10) published a critique analyzing the studies of Mellinger and the Freemans, because he felt these were the most carefully controlled of previous studies. They used pictures of simple subject matter, but ones which were varied in style and color. Malter pointed out that the results on style were unclear. The Freemans' study found children liked conventionalized pictures, but Mellinger found they favored realistic ones.

A more recent study by French (7) was based upon a sample of 98 elementary teachers, 142 first grade children, and 554 children of other grades. Children selected their preferences from two sets of illustrations in which the subject matter was the same but the complexity of the pictures was varied. The more simple ones were selected by 89 percent of the first grade children. Only in the fourth grade did children begin to choose the more complex illustrations.

Whipple (17) directed a study examining the interest appeal of illustrations to 150 fourth grade children. She found that large pictures were of more interest and that

some color was more valued by children than were black and white pictures. The author also noted that children preferred pictures of events rather than still lifes.

One of the most recent studies, by Bloomer (3), analyzed children's preferences and responses to styles and themes of illustrations. Using children in grades 4-6 (N = 336), Bloomer showed pictures prepared in three styles: line drawing, shaded line drawing, and shaded line drawing with color. In this study, as in the earlier research by Waymack and Hendrickson, subjects both made choices and wrote brief statements explaining the reason for their choices. Children wrote more detailed reactions to the line drawings. Although the children preferred the color pictures, the color tended to distract them from the subject of the picture, Bloomer reported.

Another recent study of children's preferences in picture book illustration was done by Amsden (1). Sixty boys and girls, aged three to five, from three different nursery schools, composed the research population. The children were shown two sets of 10 illustrations, with identical subject content for all the pictures within a set. Each picture varied in amount of color, value of color, and style of drawing. The children preferred light tints and dark shades to bright, saturated colors, and photographs were preferred over black and white line drawings.

Whipple's study was analyzed in King's (9) article. King summarized: "Whether a picture is colored or not is less important than the success of the picture in making the content appear real or life-like."

In a recent article, Sister Joseph comments that, "many recent books have the tendency of attracting attention to an insignificant incident in the story with an oversized, gaudy picture" (8). This draws away from the main theme of the story and leaves the child puzzled. She also believes that the meaning and content of the picture are more crucial than color. This author comments that details may be safely omitted because of the child's inability to consider many things at one time, a conclusion similar to that reached by the Freemans.

Summary of Findings

In examining these 16 studies, some points of interest emerge. First, the results on *realism versus conventionalized treatment* of the subject are unclear. While three studies (Welling, Mellinger, and the Childhood Arts report) indicated children prefer a rounded or three-dimensional and realistic treatment, the Freemans' research did not agree but reported that conventionalized treatment was preferred. The variables in Welling's study were not reported in enough detail to be conclusive, and the Childhood Arts study was so loosely controlled that its results are questionable. Thus it is essentially a question of Mellinger's findings contrasted with those of the Freemans. We have problems of both sample size and subjects' ages involved in this comparison, so a conclusive statement cannot be made in this area.

What conclusions can be reached about the size of pictures which are preferred? Bamberger and Whipple agreed that children preferred larger pictures; in contrast, the Freemans found that their sample preferred small or intimate-sized pictures. Bamberger did not report *which* of her sample preferred large pictures. However, Whipple's research was done with fourth graders in contrast to Freemans' sample of nursery school children, and thus an age difference is indicated. Current practice in the publishing industry contradicts these suggested preferences by offering large pictures for younger children and smaller pictures for older children.

Bamberger is the only researcher to investigate quantity of pictures. She found that her sample preferred books which were over 25 percent pictures.

Conclusions on color preference are similarly difficult to make. Welling's finding was that too literal use of color is not preferred. Bamberger reported that more sophisticated colors (tints, shades, and tones) were chosen by older children; in contrast, Amsden found her nursery school sample already preferred these more sophisticated colors. Both Mellinger and Whipple found that even a limited two-color illustration was preferred above a black and white drawing; while Morrison and

Sister Joseph felt that story interest, not color, is the crucial item, even among first grade children. This finding should be of interest to authors of picture books, which often have very fragile story lines.

The complexity of illustrations was examined by French, who found that teachers chose complex illustrations more frequently than did the children in his sample. Bloomer found that when given a choice, his children more frequently wrote stories about the more detailed pictures.

The use of *photographs* is the one area in which publishers' products seem to be most reflective of research findings. Several of the studies reported photographs were least frequently chosen by children, and few children's books today are illustrated with photographs. Miller did find that older children preferred photographs more frequently, and Amsden found them preferred above black and white drawings at all ages. One qualification must be made about the response to photographs: the studies were done at a time when photographs were only available in black and white. There is a chance that children's responses to the full color photographs available today might be more positive.

Thus we can see that there is no definite statement which can be made about the types of pictures children prefer. The research, much of which is at this point very old, is not conclusive. Inadequately controlled variables, incomplete reporting, and a variety of sample problems do not allow generalizations to be drawn with much certainty.

Today more books are being published, the selection process is becoming more difficult, and there is reason to feel intuitive adult choices are not entirely reliable. Yet almost no research is being done to help clarify the problem.

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