

Recreational reading: 20 years later

A 1981 survey of elementary teachers' knowledge of children's literature and recreational reading habits was duplicated to see what, if any, advances had been made.

In 1981, an article entitled "Recreational Reading: Do We Practice What Is Preached?" appeared in *The Reading Teacher* (Mangieri & Corboy, 1981). It reported data from a survey administered to 571 elementary educators from three states during the 1979–1980 school year. The sample represented urban, suburban, and rural areas of the United States; school districts that served majority and minority populations; and the full range of socioeconomic levels. This study sought to determine elementary teachers' knowledge of (a) current children's literature, (b) children's books in six literary genres, and (c) activities that they could use to promote students' recreational reading. We decided to replicate the 1981 study to determine the level of knowledge possessed by today's teachers concerning children's literature and methods of increasing students' reading for pleasure. We did so to update the database about contemporary literacy practices.

Since the 1981 recreational reading article appeared, several significant events have occurred that could have increased or decreased teachers' use of children's literature and classroom recreational reading activities. For example, many school districts have provided funds to create classroom libraries. In New York City, 300 books for each elementary classroom were purchased to augment centralized school libraries ("Books are purchased" 2001). Since the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1986), the practice of reading children's literature aloud

has been endorsed as one of the most important activities that educators can do to enhance students' achievement and pleasure in reading.

During this same time period, however, in response to the plethora of state-mandated, criterion-referenced high-stakes literacy tests, many teachers have been asked to spend more time teaching isolated skills and strategies. In addition, parents and teachers reported that today's students spend less time in leisure reading activities at home and school than those adults did when they were children (Mahiri & Godley, 1998). The number of children's books published each year has increased significantly during the last quarter century. Has teachers' knowledge of quality children's literature kept pace? Have computers and other forms of technology reduced or increased teachers' knowledge of current children's literature? Has the greater volume of information to be included in elementary content disciplines increased or decreased the amount of time that teachers allocate to recreational reading activities at school? The purpose of this article was to address these questions.

Theoretical background

During the past 25 years, several studies have demonstrated the benefits of providing more opportunities at school for students to read for pleasure and to develop their recreational, self-selected literacy habits. To illustrate, students who spent more time in recreational reading activities (a) scored higher on comprehension tests in grades 2, 4, 8, and 12; (b) had significantly higher grade-

point averages; and (c) developed more sophisticated writing styles than peers who did not engage in recreational reading (Block, 2001a; Gallik, 1999). Researchers also documented the effects of recreational reading on vocabulary development. Students who had opportunities to read recreationally over extended periods of time learned significantly more words, without direct instruction, than control subjects, due to the former group's numerous experiences of decoding unknown words during recreational reading (Burgess, 1984; Krashen, 1993).

Moreover, Smith and Joyner (1990) reported that students who engaged in ongoing recreational literacy activities during school hours read books out of school more frequently and significantly increased their independent reading levels on informal reading inventories. Even when elementary students read for only 15 minutes a day, they significantly increased their reading abilities. Average and below-average readers experienced the greatest gains (Collins, 1980; Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990; Wiesendanger & Bader, 1989).

During the past 25 years, researchers have also examined the effects of various methods used to increase the amount of time students spent in recreational reading. These methods included the following:

- sustained silent reading periods (Burgess, 1987; Collins, 1980; Dully, 1989; Dymock, 2000; Halpern, 1981; West, 1995);
- daily recreational reading with a buddy (Barron, 1990; Block & Dellamura, 2000/2001; Libsch & Breslow, 1996);
- reading to children daily (Langford & Allen, 1983; Morrow, 1986, 1991);
- incorporating children's books into content area lessons (Duke, 2000; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001);
- sharing and discussing books read (Smith & Joyner, 1990; Widdowson, Moore, & Dixon, 1999);
- replacing regular reading instruction with free reading of trade books once a week (Morrow, 1991; Strickland, Morrow, & Pelovitz, 1991);
- increasing parents' knowledge of the importance of recreational reading (Block, 2001b, in press; Pressley et al., 2001);
- teachers' modeling of the pleasure that they receive from reading pursuits (Krashen, 1993; Strickland et al., 1991);
- cross-age tutoring (Baumann, 1995; Block & Dellamura, 2000/2001);
- continuously making newly published books available to students (Barron, 1990; Pressley et al., 2001); and,

- exposing students to a wide variety of genres in classroom-based and schoolwide libraries (Barron, 1990; Duke, 2000).

These practices significantly increased the amount of time that students spend reading. The amount of time that students spend in recreational reading is a predictor of students' academic success (Gallik, 1999).

Other investigators have focused upon the amount of time that teachers and students allot to reading for pleasure. These data were not as positive (Dwyer & Reed, 1989; Halpern, 1981). The time spent in sustained silent reading in school has declined over the past 2 decades, as has students' interest in reading for pleasure (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986; West, 1995). Equally important are data that recreational reading habits and appreciation for a wide variety of genres must be acquired early in children's lives (Block, 2001b; Widdowson et al., 1999). For instance, today's primary children often received as few as 3.6 minutes a day of exposure to literary genres beyond fiction or textbooks (Duke, 2000). Further, the number of college-bound seniors who report reading *no books* during their last year of high school has doubled since 1976 (Mahiri & Godley, 1998).

Students' positive attitudes toward literacy decline continuously as they progress from kindergarten through Grade 5 (Kush & Watkins, 1996; Morrow, 1986). Teachers' attempts to alter this trend by allowing students to visit the school library more frequently have failed (Morrow, 1996). Similarly, principals, teachers, and parents have stated that the promotion of recreational reading was a lower priority in daily classroom schedules than comprehension instruction, word recognition skills, and study skills programs (Morrow, 1986). Silent reading experience may increase an individual's ability to sustain attention and concentration, which are necessary for many types of academic and professional success (Block & Mangieri, 1996). Based on these data, as new literacy challenges emerge in the 21st century, a need exists to examine teacher's knowledge concerning children's literature and recreational reading.

Methods and procedure

In this study we replicated the procedures and methods followed in the 1981 study. We administered a survey to 549 elementary school teachers engaged in professional development activities

Table 1
Percentage of respondents who could name three children's books published within the last 5 years

Educators who named three or more books published within the last 5 years	Educators who could not name a single book published within the last 5 years
1981 study 9%	71%
Current study 36%	17%

Table 2
Percentage of respondents who named a children's book written in the past 7 years in a designated category

Category	1981 study	Current study
Fiction	21%	56%
Biography	2%	41%
Poetry	3%	27%
Fantasy/Science fiction	9%	48%
Picture books	19%	37%
Mystery/adventure	8%	38%

in Georgia, Missouri, New York, and Texas during the 1999–2000 school year. These educators were chosen because their school district profiles were comparable to the sample in the 1981 investigation. Of the 549 surveys that were distributed, 514 were fully and accurately completed by the teachers who took part in the present study. This was a successful completion rate of 93%. Educators responded to the same three questions that were administered to those who took part in the 1981 study. Specifically, elementary teachers were to complete the following tasks:

1. List three children's books written in the past 5 years.
2. Name a children's book written in the past 7 years in each of the following areas:
 - a. Fiction
 - b. Biography
 - c. Poetry
 - d. Fantasy/science fiction
 - e. Picture book
 - f. Mystery/adventure
3. Identify three or more activities used to promote recreational reading for students.

We allowed participants to spend as much time as required to answer these questions. The average number of minutes spent in completing the survey was 23 minutes as compared with 18 minutes in the 1981 study. For both the original and current studies, the criterion used to determine the correctness of answers to questions 1 and 2 was the appearance of a cited title in the annual compilations of *Books in Print* during the designated years. In order for a teacher's answer to be judged correct, the title had to either be an exact match, or all words cited by the teacher had to be derivatives of the original words in that book's title.

For question 3, the correctness of respondents' answers was measured through a comparison of cited items to a compilation of recreational reading activities. To be correct, the content of an answer had to appear in the most widely used literacy methods textbooks (e.g., Block, 2001c; Burns, Roe, & Smith, 2002; Tompkins, 2001). An exact match of words was not necessary. The content had to be consistent with the purpose of the activity advocated by contemporary literacy authorities.

When teachers turned in their surveys, we interviewed those who provided three or more recreational reading activities in response to question 3. We asked interviewees to suggest methods by which the profession could increase educators' use of recreational reading activities and availability of recent selections of children's literature in elementary classrooms.

Results

With regard to question 1, in the 1981 investigation only 9% of the respondents could name three children's books published in the past 5 years. Seventy-one percent of the respondents could not identify even a single book.

In the current study, 36% of the participants could correctly name three children's books written in the past 5 years. As shown in Table 1, this increase relative to elementary teachers' knowledge is significant. However, 17% of the investigation's population was unable to cite even one book. This was more than expected, as almost 1 in 5 of the surveyed elementary teachers could not recommend recently published literature to their students.

For question 2, data from the two studies are presented in Table 2. Current elementary teachers' knowledge of recently published selections of children's literature in all six categories is greater

than peers' knowledge in 1981. The differences in knowledge levels ranged from 18% to 39% higher for each of the six genres by the current sample when compared with that of peers in 1981.

With regard to question 3, of the 571 participants in the 1981 investigation only 11% could name three activities that promoted children's recreational reading. In the present study, 65 different responses were given by participants that were considered to be correct. Twenty percent (20%) of current teachers correctly identified three such activities.

Similarly, when the percentage of educators in the original 1981 investigation who could cite more than one recreational reading activity was compared with that of peers in the 1999–2000 study, a slightly higher percentage of today's educators could identify an activity that could be used to promote reading for pleasure (68% compared with the previous 50%). These growths in a positive direction are encouraging, yet diminished when cast against a 20-year period of professional development advancements. See Sidebar for teachers' responses by grade.

Discussion

When we initiated this study, we sought to determine the knowledge of elementary educators concerning recently published children's books as well as their knowledge of practices that promote students' desires to read. We also wished to see how these figures compared with the ones in the study published in 1981.

On each of the three questions, current participants outperformed their 1981 counterparts. For question 1, four times (36%) as many teachers today could successfully name three children's books written in the past 5 years as their peers in 1981.

Today's educators' responses to question 2 were equally positive when compared with those in the prior study. In all six genres, the current group of educators knew more titles than the 1981 study's participants. The percentages by which they outperformed the prior sample ranged from 18% to 39%. Similarly, in response to question 3, more current teachers could identify three activities that promote recreational reading on the part of children than the 1981 participants. Also, more of the present group of educators could cite more than one of the aforementioned activities than their prior counterparts.

Commonly cited recreational reading activities

Recreational reading activities cited by 88 kindergarten teachers

DEAR (Drop Everything And Read), SSR (Sustained Silent Reading), NIBS (Nose In Books Silent Reading)	52
Family reading, parents read as model, bedtime stories	43
Book-It	29
Library time	28
Teacher gives exciting introduction to books/ Teacher models that reading is pleasurable	28
Book Buddies and partner reading	24
Book sharing, group share time, Author's Chair	21
Choice and variety in reading tasks	20
Computer/interactive books	16
Discussion/teacher read-alouds	16
Listening centers	16
Acting out the parts of stories	12
Book bags	12
Guided reading	12
Incentive charts for home reading	12
Incentives	12
Bookmobile	8
Book pets and reading to a stuffed animal	8
Book raffle	8
Books on audiotape	8
Field trip to a bookstore	8
Puppet shows	7
Story cards	7
Class activities/games	4
Classroom read-around	4
Contests	4
Contracts	4
Free time to read while others finish their work	4
Homework activity sheets	4
Making new book covers	4
Reading newspapers	4
Poems	4
"Read Book" series	4
Book clubs or reading clubs	3
Reading score cards	2
Rereading	1

Recreational reading activities cited by 84 first-grade teachers

DEAR, SSR, Silent Reading	50
Book Buddies and partner reading	43
Incentives and stickers	31
Book sharing and teacher read-alouds	26
Discussion	20
PJ party/Read-in/book party/book brunch	17
Accelerated Reader program	14

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Commonly cited recreational reading activities

(continued)

Recreational reading activities cited by 84 first-grade teachers (continued)

Reading and listening	12
Library time	10
Students' interests and topic choice	10
Author of the month/Author studies	8
Book swap	8
Contracts	8
Family reading	7
Reading newspapers and writing headlines	7
Book clubs	6
Books on audiotape	6
Book reports	5
Book-It	5
Contests and raffles	5
Parents read as role models	5
Bookmobile	4
Computer books	4
Folk tales	4
Read-a-grams	3
Big Books	2
Building "reading trains" around the room	2
Choral reading	2
Comfortable area in which to read	2
Home Club Accelerated Reader program	2
Homework	2
Plays about readings	2
Read-around	1
Reader of the week	1
Weekly poems	1

Recreational reading activities cited by 93 second-grade teachers

Incentives—free restaurant meals, amusement park tickets	57
DEAR and SSR	49
Book discussions, teacher read-alouds, and book talks	43
Book Buddies and partner reading	37
Book-It	20
Accelerated Reader program	18
Library time	13
Contracts for books and reading	12
Centers	10
Parents reading as a model	10
Family reading time and no TV at home for 20 minutes	9
Contests/STAR program	8
Buying new books to disperse	6
Comfortable reading area and bean bag time to read	6
TV characters/book characters enacted	5
Reading in areas of interest	4

(continued)

While the percentages of correct responses to all three questions exceeded those of the prior study, the percentages of elementary school teachers who are knowledgeable about children's literature published within the last 5 years, as well as activities that promote recreational reading for students, are still relatively low. More teachers (36%) were able to name three current children's books titles when compared with the 1981 study participants. However, 64% of the sample could not name three recently published books, and 11% could not identify a single title.

In the 1981 article (Mangieri & Corboy, 1981) it was said that "When one considers the vast number of children's books produced annually, the inability of most respondents to name three of these materials was disheartening. For whatever the reason(s), these educators simply were not staying abreast of recently published children's books" (p. 925). Regrettably, these words are still true today for many teachers.

In a similar vein, even though significant gains were shown in current teachers' knowledge of specific titles in each of the six designated genres (question 2), the percentages of educators who could name a children's book that had been written in the past 7 years was still low. In only a single category, fiction, did the percentage of teachers exceed 50% (56%). In addition, 11% of the respondents in the current study could not cite even a single book in any of the six genres. Another 18% of the participants were able to correctly identify a book in only one of the six genres.

What makes these data important was that children's literature and language arts have long maintained that the six genres included in this and the prior investigation are necessary components of a balanced literacy program (e.g., Barron, 1990; Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 2001). These findings suggest that many respondents did not have knowledge of recently published books and did not know current works that compose important parts of a children's literature program.

Moreover, two patterns emerged from these data. It appeared that a bimodal distribution existed in our profession. Eighty-eight percent of current teachers could be placed at opposite ends of the spectrum of knowledge concerning recreational reading activities and children's literature. Current teachers were either (a) very knowledgeable about recently published children's literature

and diverse activities that can be used to develop lifelong leisure reading habits for their students, or (b) not knowledgeable regarding recent children's literature titles, especially outside of the fiction genre. Teachers in the latter group were also most often unable to list any recreational reading activities.

Finally, although literacy research has demonstrated the merits of recreational reading for decades, we can raise questions as to its actual implementation. Seventeen percent of current educators could not name even one activity that promoted recreational reading on the part of children (question 3). An additional 33% of these respondents were able to cite only one. Kindergarten- through second-grade teachers cited, in order of frequency, (a) SSR and discussion of books read; (b) reading aloud by teachers, parents, or students; and (c) self-selected partner or buddy reading for pleasure. The three activities cited most frequently by teachers at grade levels 3–5 were (a) SSR, (b) discussions of books read; and (c) reading incentive programs.

Concluding comments

Few would argue that one of the major goals of literacy instruction is to create lifelong readers. For some children, this love of reading develops innately. In other children, it is nurtured in the home. For still others, it results from pleasurable and diverse experiences with a cadre of enjoyable books and recreational reading activities in elementary classrooms.

When we questioned many of those teachers who cited three or more responses to question 3 in our study, one finding emerged consistently. Teachers who had a high knowledge of children's literature and recreational reading activities were lifelong readers themselves. They provided their students with a rich and wide array of pleasurable experiences with books, and engaged students in books of diverse content, styles, and formats. These teachers routinely (a) offer numerous opportunities for children to read books of choice silently, (b) provide incentives to read at home, and (c) ask for pupils' responses to books read during recreational reading activities in class. They reported that they did so in spite of the pressures to prepare for state-mandated literacy assessments.

Today's educators also agreed that it is important to develop students' basic literacy skills.

Commonly cited recreational reading activities

(continued)

Recreational reading activities cited by 93 second-grade teachers (continued)

Book fairs	4
Books on audiotape	3
Games to reinforce books	3
Homework	2
Writing journal for reading responses	2
Read-In	1
Book clubs	1
Book reports	1
Free choice activities	1
Reading magazines	1
Reading "Mystery Readers" series	1
Reading newspaper clippings	1
Read-a-thon	1
Read to stuffed animal	1
Reader of the week—student gets to read to teacher, parents, class, and with a partner throughout the week	1
Reading Rainbow	1
Weekly reader	1

Recreational reading activities cited by 82 third-grade teachers

SSR and DEAR	50
Incentives, 600 minutes reading to receive free tickets to amusement park	26
Accelerated Reader Program	24
Book-It	22
Teacher read-alouds, discussions, and book talks	21
Book Buddies, partner reading, and reading to lower grade-level schoolmates	19
School library time	18
Book sharing/Author's Chair	17
Computer interactive books	15
Read-In	12
Reading, writing, and ravioli	10
Students reading out loud	10
Book clubs and reading clubs	9
Bookmobiles	8
Contests, such as Read-a-thon	8
Family reading and parents reading to be role models	8
Homework	7
Readers Theatre	7
Summer programs	7
Book orders/gifts	6
Choice	6
Contracts	5
Centers	4
"Story clips"—students read aloud favorite parts of a book	3

(continued)

Commonly cited recreational reading activities

(continued)

Recreational reading activities cited by 82 third-grade teachers (continued)

Book box time	3
Book fairs	2
Books on audiotape	2
Comfortable settings in which to read	2
Field trip to bookstores	2
Hooked on books program	2
In-class library	2
Reading newspapers	2
Poetry	2
Popcorn reading	2
Puppet show	2
Read-a-grams	1
Reading <i>Time for Kids</i> magazines	1
Reader of the week	1
Journal writing	1

Recreational reading activities cited by 85 fourth-grade teachers

Discussions	61
SSR and DEAR	56
Family reading and parents read as role models	42
Readers Theatre	32
Book orders from Scholastic Book Clubs	25
Book-It	25
Reading, writing, & ravioli	23
Accelerated Reader Program	22
Incentives	22
Guided reading	19
Book Buddies and partner reading	16
Read-Ins	14
Book clubs	13
In-class library	13
Library time	13
Homework	11

Recreational reading activities cited by 76 fifth-grade teachers

DEAR; SSR; Stop, Drop, and Read	50
Incentives (e.g., 600 minutes of reading to receive free amusement park tickets)	48
Book sharing, book talks, and discussions	46
Teacher reads to model that reading is pleasurable	24
Accelerated Reader Program	21
Family reading and parents read as role models	19
Book Buddies and partner reading	12
Book-It	9

(continued)

They recommended that we, as a profession, not forget to include a healthy dose of children's books and recreational reading activities in daily classroom instruction. They suggested that we accomplish these objectives through new types of professional development sessions. One suggestion was to provide teachers with opportunities to bring their favorite recently published selection of children's literature to districtwide inservice professional development meetings to share with others. At these meetings, grade-level teacher teams could discuss methods that they used to increase the time that students spend reading books recreationally at school.

While time has been allocated in many schools for teachers to hold book clubs with professional books, none of the campuses in our study provided time to share favorite recently published children's books in similar book club meetings. Teachers were not provided professional development time to update their knowledge about recently published children's literature and how these books could be used to increase students' desire to read for pleasure.

We enacted one of the study's recommendations, to provide time for teachers to meet to discuss how to use current selections of children's literature, during the 2000–2001 school year. In four school districts in Missouri, New Jersey, and Texas, 347 teachers conducted 45-minute book sharings of six recently published children's books that they had read and used with their students to promote recreational reading. Principals observed all the teachers' literacy instructional periods three times during the 6-week grading period following the sessions, which occurred from September 2000 through February 2001. During that time period, 75% of the teachers who attended the book-sharing sessions used the books discussed in their classrooms. Teachers who did not attend these professional development sessions were not observed using current selections of children's literature or the activities for recreational reading. By contrast, teachers who participated in the book sharing created 2 hours in their classroom schedules (during the first 2 weeks following the professional development sessions) to engage students in recreational reading activities. These activities had never been used by these teachers prior to the professional training session, according to

self-report data and observations of administrators and researchers.

Moreover, some of the educators that we interviewed in our study stated that they increased their awareness of children's literature by attending author sessions at annual state, regional, and international meetings of the International Reading Association. Many participants also mentioned that they have found that the fastest way to fall in love with and invent exciting ways to use current literature in recreational reading activities was to literally hold new children's books in their hands. As they read, new ideas emerge as to how these books could be used to enhance the recreational reading experiences that they planned for their students. One method of placing books in teachers' hands (and subsequently of enhancing their students' use of current children's literature) is by committing to visit the children's section at bookstores or libraries at least once a year.

We have developed a method of doing this that has become a pleasurable and habitual professional activity in our lives. Each year we compose a holiday gift-giving list, and we select one person on the list to receive a book as a present. On the day that we purchase this gift, we allocate time to bestow a prize upon ourselves as well. We spend one half to a full hour every holiday season seated in a child's chair in the bookstore's youth division, enthralled with the year's newest selections of children's literature.

Participants in our study proposed two additional methods to build colleagues' knowledge of current children's literature and recreational reading activities. The first was created by a former fifth-grade teacher. She developed the "one-minute pass around." Each year she brought the most recently published children's literature to the opening-of-school professional development session for elementary literacy teachers in her district. She distributed one book to everyone. Each teacher had one minute to read and scan that book, noting ideas as to when it could be used with content to be addressed that year. At the end of that minute, each book is passed to the left. Teachers thus have the opportunity to hold in their hands, and become familiar with, 30 recently published selections in 30 minutes. This teacher has also used the "one-minute pass around" with reluctant fifth-grade readers on the first day of school.

Commonly cited recreational reading activities

(continued)

Recreational reading activities cited by 76 fifth-grade teachers (continued)

Book clubs	8
Comfortable setting	8
Choice	7
Readers Theatre	7
Library time	4
Reading newspapers	4
Snacks	4
Visit a bookstore	4
Book fairs	3
Contracts	2
Reading a series of trade books	1

We want to express our gratitude to Celina Goss, graduate assistant, Texas Christian University, for the tabulation of data.

Several participants offered another suggestion. It was to hold children's literature Author's Chairs. At monthly team meetings, a selected teacher reads a recently published, high-quality selection of children's literature to the rest of the team and presents ways that the book can be used to foster a love of reading. If a different genre was shared each month, by the end of each school year teachers at that grade level would have knowledge of several books in nine varied genres, as well as methods of using these books to promote children's recreational reading.

Teachers in our study also suggested that librarians be scheduled to attend classes regularly to read selections of recently published books to students. As librarians read, teachers could hear new selections of children's literature with their students. Librarians could also route books to teachers, and as schools focused on a specific genre in particular months, recently published books in that genre could be displayed atop the library's bookcases and tables. In this way, teachers could peruse new titles easily in the library as they assisted their students in selecting and reading a wide variety of genres.

This study attested to the lack of attention that recreational reading is receiving in schools today. In most classrooms, the time and priority that teachers placed upon the promotion of voluntary reading is not significantly higher than it

was 20 years ago (Mangieri & Corboy, 1981; Morrow, 1986). Because recreational reading and the use of high-quality literature has been shown to increase student achievement and develop avid literacy users, we should revisit the amount of time and level of effort that we invest in reaching that goal each day, each week, and each year of our students' schooling experiences. We can begin today, and we must.

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