

**A CLOSER LOOK AT HOW CHILDREN'S CHOICE BOOK
AWARD PROGRAMS MOTIVATE UPPER ELEMENTARY
STUDENTS TO READ**

Honors Thesis

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Rationale

The purpose of my thesis was to learn more about children's choice book award programs, specifically the *Massachusetts Children's Book Award Program*, which is sponsored by Salem State University. Specifically, I wanted to know what prior research tells us about the impact of children's choice award programs and children's motivation to read. I also wanted to discover children's reasons for participating in such a program and their strategies for selecting books and deciding on a favorite.

Review of the Literature

Learning how to read is the main focus for all students in the early elementary school years. Early elementary school teachers dedicate large portions of the school day to practicing reading as well as teaching new literacy skills for children to become stronger readers. Guided reading groups are held daily and reading specialists intervene when necessary in order to ensure every child knows the basics of how to decode words and comprehend what he or she is reading.

While this dedication to reading is great in the early years, issues sometimes arise after a child has learned the basics of how to read. Unfortunately, to resolve these issues, a teacher's job becomes more difficult. The challenge is providing opportunities for students to develop a love of reading. All too often, once a child learns to read successfully, schools take a shift to other content areas and may not share the joys of reading with students as much as they should. Once students have mastered the foundational reading skills they need, less time is provided for them to experience the enjoyment side of reading. Students then categorize reading as strictly something that is done in school for assignments. Educators have the power to teach students how to read; however, discovering the joy of reading cannot be easily taught.

Motivating students to become independent readers is no easy task and takes the support of all influential people in the students' lives. "Motivation to read can be defined as the likelihood of engaging in reading or choosing to read" (Gambrell, 2012, p. 172). Gambrell shares seven strategies she created that can be used in attempts to engage students in books. She calls them the "Seven Rules of Engagement," and a few of her rules go hand and hand with the goals of children's choice book award programs.

Gambrell's first rule is, "Students are more motivated to read when the reading tasks and activities are relevant to their lives" (Gambrell, 2012, p. 173). Children are making new discoveries about the world they live in every day and will continue to do so for the rest of their lives. Students need to make the realization that what they read can be applied to these discoveries and aspects of their lives. Children want to read about things that they are familiar with but may want to know more about. Books that contain a relatable character, maybe one around the same age as the students, are important to include on the master lists. When students connect with a character in a story they are experiencing an exciting aspect of reading. Reading activities used by teachers should help students make connections between literature and their personal lives.

Gambrell's fourth rule is, "Students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to make choices about what they read and how they engage in and complete literary tasks" (Gambrell, 2012, p. 175). Providing the power of choice to students is so important but hard to do at times, especially when following strict curriculum maps. When children have the option to take responsibility for their own learning, it means much more to them and has positive results. Choice is a large factor with the children's choice book award

programs because no student is forced to participate and there are various options for book titles to pick from to read.

Gambrell's fifth rule is the last one that ties in perfectly with proving the award programs are great tools to motivate children to read. It states, "Students are more motivated to read when they have opportunities to socially interact with others about the text they are reading" (Gambrell, 2012, p. 175). Being able to communicate about what they are reading fosters a love of reading because students become passionate about certain books and want to share their passion with others. If students hear the book discussions going on around them about the titles in a book award program, they most likely will be intrigued and curious enough to start reading the book to see what all the fuss is about. Voicing opinions and discussing details from texts heightens students' comprehension skills and allows them to become active readers.

Knowing what motivates children to read is vital to assisting them to become regular readers. Strommen and Mates conducted interviews with sixth and ninth graders in an attempt to identify factors associated with the development of a love of reading. They presented the older children's and teens' responses in an article, and the results greatly support the positive influence children's choice award programs have on students. Repeated research done on older children reading habits found that "few children, skilled readers or not, choose to devote their leisure time to reading" (Strommen & Mates, 2004, p.188). It is known that children's attitude towards reading greatly depends on their reading ability. If a child struggles decoding words or with comprehension, he or she is not going to choose to read during free time. That is why it is very important that children are provided with appropriate leveled books for them to be able to read independently and avoid frustration. Enthusiasm for reading from the adults in children's lives also plays a major role on their motivation to read (Strommen & Mates, 2004).

The interview responses from Strommen and Mates' questions support the effectiveness of children's choice award programs. For example, students who read for pleasure shared with them that they have book discussions with people in their social circle. Children who enjoy reading want to talk about their favorite books and authors, and the award programs provide students with this opportunity. "Recounting stories, or talking about character and plot with another enthusiastic reader, was an important element of Reader's experiences" (Strommen & Mates, 2004, p. 193). The influence of being part of a family who supports and encourages reading was a major aspect stressed in this research. "An important attribute of each reader's environment is that it includes others who read for pleasure" (Strommen & Mates, 2004, p. 194). Making an effort to include families in the award programs would make them even more successful, if it hasn't been done already in some school systems. Parents are a vital component in making children passionate readers and should be well aware of their impact they have on their child's literacy competence.

Inspiring upper elementary grade students to read has become more challenging as the years go on. Technology serves as a great distraction and many children would rather play on their gaming systems or watch television than curl up and get lost in a chapter book. Children's choice book award programs serve as an excellent tool to shift students' interests to books and keep them interested in reading as they mature and enter older grades. A large factor that makes the children's book award programs successful is the power of choice. Students are never forced to participate in the program or told what to read and having this control is refreshing for students.

Crow states, "Children's choice award programs have proven to be effective weapons in the battle to get and keep children reading" (Crow, 2010, p. 12). She believes these particular

state programs are so effective because of their focus on positive experiences between children and books. Through these positive experiences and interactions, children are more likely to form a special bond with reading and become passionate about certain genres or authors. Children are not expected to enjoy every type of genre and it is important for them to be given the opportunity to discover what type of books they truly enjoy reading. Crow notes that the books on the annual book lists serve as a “launching pad to discover more books by the same authors or different authors from the same genres” (Crow, 2010, p. 13). Children become true bookworms when they discover what genres or authors appeal to their interests, and a spark of excitement towards reading is created. If the entire school works together to promote the program, shared reading experiences occur. If the majority of fourth, fifth, and sixth graders in a school are motivated to participate in the program and are all reading books from the same list, book discussions will naturally occur. Not only do these book conversations promote comprehension, but they also establish bonds between students and teachers that create a natural sense of community within the school.

Academically, children’s choice award programs have been proven to improve reading scores by the students who participate in the programs (Obert & Barr, 2005, p. 22). It is known that the best way for children to become stronger and more fluent readers is by actually reading and dedicating a large amount of time to reading. “The more students read independently, the better their reading becomes” (Mohr, 2006, p. 82). The award programs are so valuable due to the power they have to promote reading in students.

Although students have the choice to participate in the program, it is more likely than not that they will. This is because the programs “increase literacy through peer pressure; reluctant readers are spurred by classmates to check out nominated books” (Seagrave, 2004, p. 174).

Students may not even realize it, but they are motivated by their peers to delve into a book. Being able to participate in the voting process is intriguing, but being able to discuss the books with friends who have read them is very motivational. Mohr explains, “Although teachers have many opportunities to share books, research identifies peers and family members as more influential in students’ text selections” (Mohr, 2006, p. 85). The books that make up the master lists may not have been given a chance by the students if they did not participate in the award program. A librarian named Helen Jordan discovered while participating in her state’s children’s choice book award program that students were reading books who may not have “without the stimulation and momentum of these programs” (Seagrave, 2004, p. 174). Children’s choice book award programs stimulate reading as well as expose children to the many genres children may fall in love with.

Through experiences with different books and authors, children develop this passion of reading for enjoyment on their own. Children’s choice book award programs provide the necessary experiences students need with different books and authors. The award programs motivate students to continue to read, and read for enjoyment. Children’s choice book award programs have been proven to successfully motivate students in the upper elementary grades to choose to read on their own as a leisure activity. The results that come from participating in these award programs continue to be very positive across the country and have a major impact on creating independent readers.

The Massachusetts Children’s Book Award Program is used by schools and public libraries in Massachusetts and is an excellent example of how influential children’s choice book award programs are for students. Children’s choice book award programs, such as the MCBA, provide students with the opportunity to find pleasure from books. Participating students also

experience the power readers have on promoting book titles by having the opportunity to vote for their favorite titles. Every state in the United States, except for Mississippi, has such program, and each one has its own set of guidelines for the participating schools and libraries to follow. The Massachusetts Children's Book Award Program is an excellent example of a children's choice award program to examine because it has been around since 1975. Dr. Helen Constant founded the MCBA program and Salem State University has always sponsored the program. The program is specifically for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders because it has been shown that students in these grades sometimes develop a disinterest towards reading. Students consult a "master list" that contains 25 book titles that the MCBA selection committee chose for the students to read and vote on. Teachers, librarians, publishers and students are encouraged to nominate book titles to be placed on the "master list" for the following school year. The selection criteria for all books nominated is: "literary quality, variety of genres, representation of diverse cultural groups, reader appeal, and books published within a five-year period before the award year" (Obert, 2004, p. 74). The titles also must be available in paperback format in order to make it more affordable for the school systems and libraries. The MCBA selection committee is made up of volunteers who read the nominated book titles and then rate and write a review on whether or not they feel the title successfully meets the criteria. After reading and reviewing all nominated titles, the committee selects 25 titles to be placed on the "master list." When nominated titles are reviewed, the volunteers keep in mind how a fourth, fifth, or sixth grader would interpret the content. The criteria for the MCBA attempts to ensure that students will be able to connect with the books on the "master list" by requiring the nominated books to be recent releases as well as representations of diverse cultures. The selection committee's main goal is for the readers to relate to the books on the "master list." It has been found that most children are drawn to books

that “mirror their lives and social surroundings” (Mohr, 2006, p. 86). Selecting titles that students will most likely relate to and enjoy is vital for a program’s success.

The voting aspect of the MCBA is very exciting for the students and is a key motivator in getting students to participate. In order for students to be eligible to vote for their favorite book title and author for the MCBA award, they must read or hear at least five books from the “master list.” After completing at least five of the books, students can vote for their favorite book at their school’s library or city’s public library. Participating organizations have voting tables set up for students to visit and cast their votes. There is an online ballot a school or library representative must access in order to submit the total number of votes from their students; it is found on the Salem State University website. The ballot requires the school or library information to be filled out, along with the total number of votes for each book that was on the “master list.” It is very quick and easy to use. This year the ballot was open until March 12, 2014. Once the votes are totaled and the winning book title is determined, the author of the title is contacted and recognized for the honor. The results are also posted on the MCBA website for all of the participating students to see. A plaque is given to the winning author to celebrate his or her accomplishment. It is a great honor for authors to know that the audience they wrote for chose their piece of work to be recognized. MCBA archives can be found on the Salem State University website of all of the past master lists and author winners.

It is not mandated that all schools and public libraries participate in their states’ children’s choice book award program, so registering with their state’s award program is completely optional. If a school or library does decide to register, they are given all of the information about the program and book titles that year. Sometimes even promotional items are provided for librarians or teachers to display to capture students’ interests. It is important to note

that the MCBA and all of the other award programs are not used to create competition among students but to foster a love for reading and provide students the power to voice their opinions on books. Teachers are asked to not make any of the book titles part of the “master list” required reading for their students because this eliminates the choice factor of the program that students respect. The dedicated volunteers for all of the children’s choice award programs do their best to make it easy for schools and libraries to implement the award programs and participate in them. The entire experience is meant to be exciting and rewarding for all involved.

There is some necessary planning to be made when participating in the program as well as some additional time; however, the benefits of having the program available for students outweigh any minor inconveniences for staff. For the program to be successful in a school, all staff needs to collaborate and display their enthusiasm for the award program. Teachers and administrators should know the history of the award and how the entire process works from start to finish. Whoever decides to be the program coordinator for their school or library takes on the role of organizing and running the activities that are part of the program. Hosting an informational session before the program begins is encouraged so all staff feel prepared for how to spread the word to students and answer any questions that may arise along the way. The major tasks the program coordinator takes on are registering for the program, obtaining the required book list, ordering the books, planning promotional activities, promoting program and books to staff, introducing books to students, conducting the voting, submitting vote totals, and announcing the state winner (Obert, 2004, p. 12). The most important role a program coordinator has is to make the program readily accessible to the students and teachers and present it as an enjoyable event. In the school library there should be a table set up, posters hung up around the school, and maybe even book clubs hosted to encourage book discussions among the

participating students. Participating in the award programs should be fun, not a hassle, and with the right amount of enthusiasm and support there will be only positive outcomes.

Research Question and Method

Having investigated the prior research on children's choice award programs, I wanted to investigate the following questions:

- 1) What are children's reasons for participating in a children's choice award program?
- 2) What are their strategies for selecting books and deciding on a favorite?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted a survey in an elementary school that participates in the MCBA program. The librarian of the elementary school was in charge of promoting and organizing the program at her school, and she distributed the survey to the students who were eligible to vote the program. Seventeen fourth and fifth graders who participated in the 2013-2014 MCBA program provided information and feedback on their experience.

Student Survey Results

Out of the seventeen participating students, nine of them were in fourth grade and eight were in fifth grade. For ten students this was their first year voting in the MCBA program and for the seven other students this was their second year voting. Thirteen students read five books from the MCBA's "master list," which is the minimum number students have to read in order to vote for their favorite book title. Four students read six books from the "master list".

The fourth question of the survey asked the students to write in the book title that earned their final vote to receive the MCBA award. Thirteen book titles from the 2013-2014 master list were shared by the students and the titles were as follows:

Chomp by Carl Hiaasen

Out of My Mind by Sharon M. Draper

Tango: The Tale of an Island Dog by Eileen Beha

The Lost Children by Carolyn Cohagan

Small as an Elephant by Jennifer Richard Jacobson

Perfect Game by Fred Bowen

I Survived: Hurricane Katrina, 2005 by Lauren Tarshis

Summer of the Gypsy Moths by Sara Pennypacker

The Trouble with Chickens: A J.J. Tully Mystery by Doreen Cronin and Kevin Cornell

Jake and Lily by Jerry Spinelli

The Lost Hero (Heroes of Olympus, Book 1) by Rick Riordan

Emma on Thin Icing (Cupcake Diaries) by Coco Simon

World Cup by Matt Christopher

From the 25 book titles on the MCBA's master list, thirteen of these books received a final vote from the participating students who completed the survey.

There were several themes from the students' responses on the surveys to explain why the students voted for the specific book title. An interesting or adventurous plot was a main reason for a majority of the students. A few students wrote that they voted for *Tango: The Tale of an Island Dog* because it focused on a dog. One student wrote, "Because it was about a dog trapped on an island trying to find his way home." Another reason students shared was because the story was heartwarming. A reason a student voted for *Summer of the Gypsy Moths* was because "the two girls made her smile." In regards to the book *World Cup* a student wrote, "Because it was interesting, well written, and I like soccer." The last reason that differed from the others was because the book had more than one problem.

When asked why they chose to participate in the MCBA program there were a few different responses from students. Some students shared that they participated for fun, while others shared because they wanted to be challenged. One student wrote, “It gives me a chance to read a new selection of books that I normally wouldn’t read.” The majority of students responded that they participated because they love to read or because they enjoy reading. Two students wrote in that they wanted to give the program a try.

The second to last question asked students to share the process they went through when choosing the five books to read from the MCBA master list. The majority of students wrote that they read the summary of the story on the back to see if it was interesting to them. Others shared that they reviewed the cover of the book. One student shared, “I decide which books from the MCBA by looking if the book is interesting or if it is an author I like.” One student only went by the titles of the books to make the selection.

The last question of the survey provided the students with an opportunity to share any additional opinions or thoughts regarding their experience with the MCBA program. Students wrote that they loved the program and they had fun. One student wrote, “All of my overall favorite books have come from the MCBA program.” Another shared, “Keep making them!” Two students wrote that they hope to do the program again next year. Lastly, a student shared, “Thank you for letting our school do this program.”

Discussion

Based on the survey results from the seventeen fourth and fifth grade students, the MCBA program is an enjoyable and motivating experience. This strongly supports prior research that stated the effectiveness of children’s choice book award programs.

Thirteen different book titles were selected to win the MCBA 2014 award by these students, which proves the importance of variety on the MCBA “master list.” It was very surprising to see so many different book titles receive the final vote from the seventeen students who completed the survey. Even more surprising was the book that received the 2014 MCBA award, *Out of My Mind*, was only voted for by one of the students from this elementary school. The selection committee can continue to assume that the fourth, fifth, and sixth graders who are participating in the MCBA appreciate diversity in the genres present on the “master list.” Some students even shared that they were exposed to different genres by participating in the program and discovered new books to add to their list of favorites. Students shared their interactions with some of the characters in the books they read and this supports prior research done that notes the importance of having relatable characters in the book choices.

It should be noted that many students shared on the survey they chose the books to read based on the cover of the book. Another major theme was students read the summaries of the books that can be found on the backs, which is an excellent reading strategy. The MCBA selection committee should be aware of the themes of why students choose the book titles from the “master list.” A boring book cover could be a reason it is never chosen to read, no matter how engaging the story inside is. The program is designed for fourth, fifth, and sixth graders and although some might not agree that a book’s worthiness to be read is based off its cover, in the mind of an upper elementary aged student, that could be reason enough.

Interestingly, no results from the survey proved that this group of students participated in the MCBA or chose particular books because of their friends. These seventeen students voiced their independent decisions on choosing to participate and on choosing what books to read. This differs from the previous research pointing to the importance of conversations regarding the

selection of books among students. Prior research stressed the importance of the community that is formed from children's choice book award programs within the schools; however, this group of students did not provide any evidence of this social aspect of the program in their responses.

The survey results also showed that most of the students participating in the MCBA program already love to read. Further research and planning for this program would involve discovering more ways to motivate the students who have not yet become passionate readers to participate in the program. Improvements could be implementing MCBA book clubs to provide opportunities for book discussions or simply planning a small celebration at the end of the program. Further research could be done to investigate how Massachusetts' elementary schools and libraries are promoting the program to its students. Enhancing the way the MCBA program is advertised to students could also increase the numbers of participating students. This already successful program would become even more influential if it attracted the students who do not already choose independent reading as an out of school activity.

When asked for overall opinions regarding the MCBA program on the survey, students had only positive feedback to share. Positive feedback and the other results on the survey prove the effectiveness of the MCBA program's goal of providing more opportunities for students to fall in love with reading. The positive feedback on the survey truly emphasizes the value of the Massachusetts Children's Book Award program and all children's choice book award programs in general.

Conclusion

The goal of all educators is to make every child a passionate reader; not just a reader who knows the basic foundational reading skills to function in society but a reader who escapes to new lands and gets lost in a book. There is no greater feeling than discovering a favorite book or

author. Children who are not given the opportunities to develop a love for reading are not only held back academically, but are also left out of being able to experience new things about their world right from the comfort of their home. Books take readers to new places and introduce them to new characters, and that is a gift that every child should receive. Children's choice book award programs utilize the components that are known to motivate students to read and help make reading an essential part of children's lives.

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