A Model for School Library Searches

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Abstract

From the first days of elementary school, students spend time reading. Much of this time is taken up with assigned stories and novels, but there is almost always an expectation that they read on their own. In order to read independently, these children and teens must select a book. The process that typical students go through when choosing a book is outlined in our model of book selection. This model contains three different branches that differentiate the selection process for elementary, middle, and high school students.

Keywords: school, library, child development, book selection

Introduction

Students of all ages spend time finding and reading books for pleasure. At different stages of development, the process of searching for books follows a different piece of this three-part model, but each group of students starts and ends in the same place. Students begin with the need to find a book and finish with a book to read. In their 2007 education psychology textbook, Paul Egen and Don Kauchak outline the theory of cognitive development presented by Jean Piaget (p. 34). Piaget, a Swiss psychologist and biologist, identified four distinct stages of development, three of which correspond with students in elementary, middle, and high schools.

According to Piaget's stages of development, elementary students are typically in the preoperational stage, which is categorized by symbolic thought and ideas of the world that are dominated by what is perceived. Middle school students are moving through the concrete operational stage, during which they learn to relate concrete objects to abstract ideas. This age group begins to make logical connections between what they know, the concrete, and abstract ideas and theories. High school students, and even some advanced middle school students, have moved into the formal operations stage of development. During this stage, they become more and more able to think abstractly, systematically, and hypothetically (Egen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 40). As our model will demonstrate, the seemingly simplistic search for a book to read can become complex, as children move through the stages of development.

The McKeithan-Kohlman-Berry Model
or
Just pick a book already!
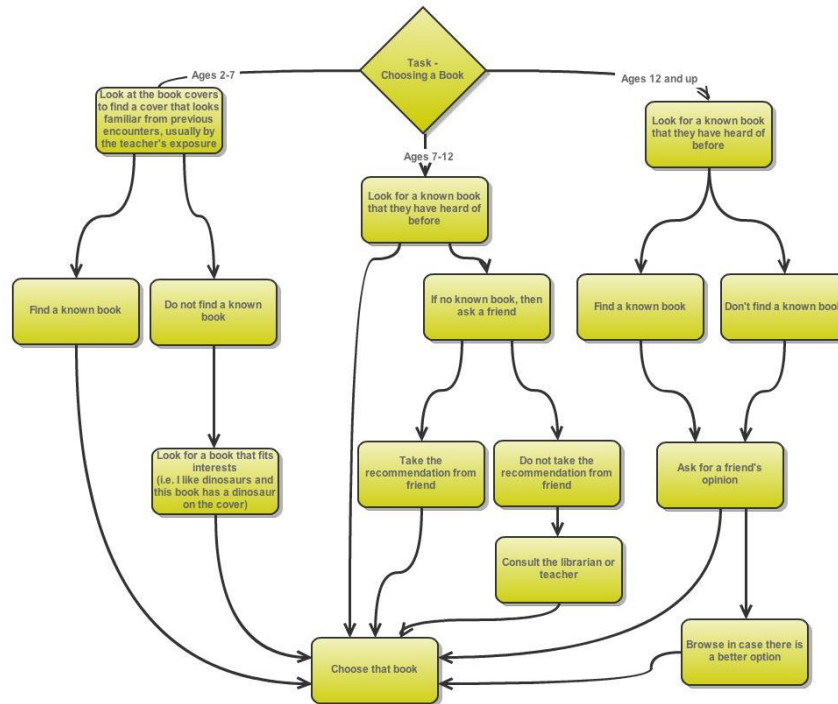
Elementary Students

At the elementary level, students begin a search for a book when the teacher or librarian suggests the idea and gives the students time to accomplish this task. Students typically begin their search by browsing the shelves for known books; this includes non-fiction as well as fictional series such as Junie B. Jones by Barbara Park. Students will often choose books that have been introduced in the classroom. For example, if students have recently studied dinosaurs in science class, they are likely to search for a book about dinosaurs. At this point, most students will check out the book.

According to Piaget, elementary children are in the preoperational stage of development. During this stage, students tend to think very literally; what they see is what exists (Egen &

Kauchak, 2007, p. 38). Previous knowledge and exposure to a topic motivates students to pick up a familiar book. Because younger students base their decisions on what they can see, the cover of a book is very important. Donald O. Case (2008) noted this trait in *Looking for Information: A Survey of Research on Information Seeking, Needs, and Behaviors*. Based on information gathered about seven-year-old children browsing in a library, "[The researcher] found that children often picked books on the basis of their covers rather than a closer examination of the contents" (p. 305).

However, if students do not find a book on a known topic right away, they will typically look for a book that fits their interests. Many times, this means they will ask the librarian for help. Students may want to know where a specific book is, but most often they ask where the books of a particular subject can be found. After the librarian has led the students to the area they are looking for, they will select a book to check out.

In 2003, Sandra Priest-Ploetz conducted a study of book circulation in an elementary school library. The study focused on students in kindergarten through second grade. She found that a majority of young students chose non-fiction books. She believes that the Dewey system of classification, which is used in most school libraries, lends itself to young children by putting like things together. Also, because the fiction section is organized by author's last name, which many young students cannot read, finding particular books in this area can become a difficult task. Organization by topic, as in the non-fiction section, makes selection easier for these children (p. 25).

Young students tend to ask adults about where to locate books, but they do not ask an adult for an opinion about the book. Students at this stage of development often don't communicate with their peers, so book suggestions for other students are rare.

Middle School Students

In middle school, the search for a book begins when students identify the need for a book. Their search can be motivated by a teacher requirement or personal desire. At this point, middle school students will think back to a book, series, or author they have read and enjoyed. Their first step is to look for more books in that same series or books that are written by their favorite author. They have become familiar with the organization of the school library, so they do not have much trouble finding their desired section independently. If students find a book that appears interesting, they will check it out. The tendency of individuals in the concrete operational stage is to group "objects on the basis of common characteristics" (Egen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 39-40). This inclination helps explain why students will veer toward familiar authors or series, until they have exhausted all possible options.

If the initial search for a familiar author does not produce results, students will turn to a friend for help. If the friend offers an acceptable option, students will check out the recommended book.

After asking a friend and reaching no conclusion, students will eventually turn to the teacher or the librarian for assistance. This is done somewhat reluctantly, and they are hesitant to take the advice of the adult asked. Students will take suggestions from an adult, but only as a last resort. In fact, Leigh Ann Jones (2007) cites a 1992 study that found that only 50% of middle school students will *sometimes* ask a librarian for a recommendation; only 27% state that they "usually" request help from the librarian (p. 46).

The logic of the middle school students' selection process can be attributed, in large part, to the fact that they are developing the "ability to think logically about concrete objects" (Egen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 39). Their budding rational thought process develops something like this: *If I*

liked a book by this author, I will like other books by the same author. On occasions when their first option does not work, they think: *I didn't find anything, but my friend and I share interests, so we will probably like the same books; I will ask my friend.* They are using their newly discovered logical thinking skills to find a book to read. They make the logical connection that the author writes many books in the same style or on the same topic. These students have also begun to move past the egocentrism that dominated their world during the preoperational stage (Egen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 38), which makes them more likely to request help from a friend or, in the end, an adult.

High School Students

Older students approach the task of choosing a book a little differently than younger children. Their process starts the same way it might for younger children. First, they look for a book, author, or topic that they are already familiar with. While high school students will still look for a book or author that they know, they are also more likely to consult with a friend before making a choice. In the adolescent stage, peers become a major support system for nearly all decision-making. According to Egen and Kauchak (2007), research has "found that a students' choice of friends predicts grades, disruptive behaviors, and teachers' rating of involvement in school" (64). If students are dependent on their peers for large decisions, it would follow that students would highly value their peers' book suggestions, a fairly minor decision. They may make a selection based on their friend's opinion, but they will probably still browse the shelves just in case. Only after they have done that last search of the collection will they make a selection.

According to Piaget, children ages 12 and up fall into the Formal Operational stage of cognitive development. This means that they have developed the ability to think abstractly,

systematically, and hypothetically. Piaget claims that older children have developed the ability to

think hypothetically (Egen & Kauchak, 2007, p. 40). They are more likely to browse the shelves,

looking for an option that is "better" than the book they are considering. They are able to think,

What if there is a better choice out there? While younger children would be content with the

choice they have made because it is right in front of them, older students can see that there are

other paths to take that may have a more satisfactory outcome: *Yes, I could get this mystery by*

Mary Higgins Clark, but what if there is an even better mystery book that I haven't seen yet? It

is not uncommon to see older students walk up and down all the rows before solidifying their

book choice by heading to check out.

Conclusion

In every school library, students must complete a search for books to read. Because

elementary, middle, and high school students are at different stages of development, the search

for a book to read is different at each level. This process can be explained by a three-part model.

Each section begins and ends in the same place. As children grow and develop so do their

interests, as well as their searching styles. Although their search processes may vary, this model

represents a typical student in each of the three stages of development.

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