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Early Literacy and the Publishing Industry

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Abstract:

Literacy is one of the most important gateways to and strongest indicators of lifelong learning and future success. Research suggests that literacy and the skills needed for literacy develop over a period of time through many different types of activities and exposures. While exposure to books is not the entire foundation for developing literacy, it is a key part. To aid development of literacy in children, it is absolutely necessary that children's books be developmentally appropriate. In this research paper, I aim to investigate how well recently-published children's books are aligning with the developmental needs of their readers. Inquiring into the appropriateness of these books and the publishing process will help shed light on the many factors that hinder the production of high-quality products for children.

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Introduction

Literacy is one of the most important gateways to and strongest indicators of lifelong learning and future success (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). It can mean the difference between a healthy life and an unhealthy life, job promotion and career stagnation, poverty and wealth. While the United States has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, a survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) found that 21% of adult Americans perform at the lowest literacy level. This means approximately 40 million Americans have only basic reading, writing, and prose comprehension skills (Kirsch et al., 2002). Jobs have increasingly high standards for literacy, and the fact that more than 1 in 5 people in the United States have limited literacy skills is problematic (Kirsch et al., 2002).

Research suggests that literacy and the skills needed for literacy develop over a period of time through many different types of activities and exposures. We must abandon the “maturationist” or “readiness view” of literacy—which proposes that children learn to read and write only once they reach a particular threshold of physical and neurological

growth and that attempts to promote literacy in younger, less developed children is futile (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 31).

Opportunities to develop and strengthen literacy occur as young as birth. As Neuman et al. (2000) state, “From their initial experiences and interactions with adults, children begin to read words, process letter-sound relations...consolidating this information into patterns that allow for automaticity and fluency in reading and writing” (p. 5-6). Because literacy develops over a period of time, we must be conscious of the particular literacy goals of each age and developmental stage. In short, young people must be exposed to materials, activities, and interactions that are developmentally-appropriate—that is, these materials specifically target the developmental goals of their target juvenile audience.

Part of literacy development is “regular and active interactions with print” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 6). While exposure to books is not the entire foundation for developing literacy, it is a key part. To aid development of literacy in children, it is absolutely necessary that children’s books be developmentally appropriate.

However, we cannot assume that all children’s books are developmentally appropriate. Like all things bought and sold, books are subject to market demands. Publishers want to publish books that will sell, and that may mean following certain trends and addressing certain market pressures that do not align with developmentally-appropriate practice.

In this research paper, I aim to investigate how well recently-published children’s books are aligning with the developmental needs of their readers. Inquiring into the appropriateness of these books and the publishing process will help shed light on the many factors that hinder the production of high quality products for children. I hope to offer a

useful assessment of the current children's book market in terms of its ability to provide developmentally appropriate materials as well as provide recommendations for better alignment between child developmental needs and market demands.

I will begin by outlining literacy goals for children ages 3-5. I will then discuss how developmentally-appropriate picture books aid goal achievement. Next, I explore the current practices of the juvenile book publishing industry and review three popular picture books (Appendix 1-3).

Literacy Goals for Preschoolers

For emergent readers of preschool age (3-5 years old), the main focuses are: exposure to print, mastering the alphabetic principle, phonemic and phonological awareness, and vocabulary growth. Research has shown that these goals are best achieved not through rote learning but through social interactions and meaningful experiences (Neuman and Roskos, 2005).

Exposure to Print

Throughout the first few months and years of life, interactions with print are crucial to developing literacy. In fact, with visual and audio cues to guide them, babies and toddlers begin to learn that print is connected to meaning (Neuman et al., 2000). Each letter and combination of letters represents a certain sound and socially-known definition or meaning.

Particularly in preschool, a main goal in literacy development should be to “enhance children’s exposure to and concepts about print” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 7). Through this exposure to print, children learn about the process of reading (left to right, top to bottom) and begin to understand how words and letters indicate different sounds and meanings. The text, rather than the picture, holds the true meaning of the story. At preschool ages, children will often sit alone and pretend to read and use the pictures to guide their understanding of the storyline (Neuman et al., 2000; Searson, 1999). This is a great indicator that they are picking up on the key concepts of print.

Mastering the Alphabetic Principle

Mastery of the alphabetic principle involves understanding the relationship between a letter and its sounds and learning how to distinguish letters by their visuo-spatial characteristics (Neuman et al., 2000). It is a foundation for building other literacy skills, like phonemic and phonological awareness. Children acquaint themselves with the alphabetic system through exposures to print, reading, writing, and invented spelling (National Association for Education of Young Children, 1998). In invented spelling, children apply what they know about the shapes, sounds and associations of letters and start to experiment spelling out words on paper (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Phonological awareness refers to a child's understanding and awareness that "speech is composed of identifiable units, such as spoken words, syllables, and sounds" (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 8). With phonological awareness, we are able to deconstruct sentences and words to their smallest identifiable units, and we are able to construct them anew to create new words, sounds, and meanings. Children who demonstrate phonological awareness will often repeat sounds and syllables aloud, or separate out the syllables in a long word (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007).

Very simply, phonemes are units of sound. However, phonemic awareness involves much more than understanding and recognizing units of sound. Children who demonstrate phonemic awareness are attune to the sounds, rhythms, and audial differences and similarities between syllables and words (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007). Here, the emphasis is on being able to distinguish similar sounding words (Neuman et al., 2000). For example, at preschool age children begin to recognize that the words 'mad' and 'lad' have a similar sound and similar endings, but that what distinguishes the two words (and, therefore, their meanings) are the beginning sounds made up by the letters 'm' and 'l.' Phonemic awareness is much more nuanced, as it is "more related to specific letters and sounds, and usually develops later than phonological awareness" (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007, p. 222). Strasser and Seplocha (2007) further note that because of the complexity of phonemic awareness, it typically doesn't develop naturally and "spontaneously" and requires the aid of adults to "draw attention" to instances of phonemes (p. 222).

Vocabulary Growth and Conversation

A preschooler's vocabulary grows phenomenally at this stage in development. The typical two-year-old has a vocabulary of about 200 words, but by the time she is five years old, her vocabulary could grow to about 2,000 words (Searson, 1999; Jalongo, 2004). Vocabulary growth occurs through verbal social interactions as well as through exposures to text. It is especially important for children to be exposed to different genres of text, as some vocabulary is more prevalent in certain types of texts than others (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998).

With vocabulary growth and an increasing understanding of sentence structure, young preschool children are also beginning to engage in more complex conversation (Jalongo, 2004). With these literacy tools, they are exploring how to best communicate with the people around them.

Learning Through Meaningful Experience

In 1998, the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children adopted a joint position statement regarding developmentally appropriate practice for literacy development in young children. This research-based position statement is highly regarded and is still used today. One of the major findings was that literacy is optimally developed through meaningful experiences, not rote learning techniques:

Teaching practices associated with outdated views of literacy development and/or learning theories are still prevalent in many classrooms. Such practices include extensive whole-group instruction and intensive drill and practice on isolated

skills for groups or individuals. These practices, not particularly effective for primary-grade children, are even less suitable and effective with preschool and kindergarten children. Young children especially need to be engaged in experiences that make academic context meaningful and build on prior learning. (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998, p. 31)

Children learn through exploring the content of their experiences and interactions, and awareness of letters and sounds does not “take center stage” but is a side-effect of these meaningful learning experiences (Neuman and Roskos, 2005, p. 25).

These are the developmental goals for literacy acquisition in pre-school age children. Looking at the big picture, we should also recognize that individuals do not learn language for the sake of learning language. Learning to read, write, and communicate through many different mediums introduces children to a whole new social world. Just like learning to walk, learning language affords a new level of independence that a child must learn to navigate: particularly at the pre-school age, “children are now struggling with their place in the world, grappling with their role in the family, attempting to forge an identity of their own—all within the comfortable space of their home” (Searson, 1999, 61). This adds a new dimension to the developmental needs of children, especially preschoolers: they need a safe space to explore language and their growing sense of identity and independence.

Components of Developmentally Appropriate Picture Books

As established above, preschool-age children need exposure to print through meaningful experience in order to achieve their age-targeted literacy goals. One fantastic

way to do this is through reading picture books. As with all books, picture books can be of high or low quality. In this section, I define picture books. I will then discuss the components of high-quality, developmentally-appropriate picture books, which include distinguishable letters and words, rich vocabulary, language to develop phonological and phonemic awareness, predictive text and storyline, robust images, cultural recognition, and quality engagement.

Defining the Picture Book

It is easy to conclude that picture books are books with pictures. However, not all books with pictures are picture books. In picture books, the pictures are just as important as the text (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007). Strasser and Seplocha (2007) elaborate: “[Picture books] contain at least three elements: what is told with words, what is told through the pictures, and what is conveyed from the combination of the two” (p. 220). Reading a picture book produces “an aesthetic experience which is more than the sum of the parts (Kiefer, 1988, p. 261).

Because pictures and text are both so important to the reading experience, much care goes into the production of the storyline and illustrations. A typical picture book is short, at about 32 pages (Litowinsky, 2001). It is usually only a couple hundred words long, and the text is very “straightforward” and “written in a direct, simple style” (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007, p. 220). The text is straightforward, featuring mostly nouns and actions, because it is the illustrations’ job to provide the descriptive context: how the characters look, their expressions, the setting, etc. Because the pictures convey so much meaning and

context, it is especially important to make the right design and composition choices in terms of color, shape, texture, balance, and value (Kiefer, 1988). Even young children are quick to pick up on the implied meanings of these artistic choices (Kiefer, 1988).

And now, what makes a developmentally-appropriate picture book for preschool children?

Distinguishable Letters and Words

While both text and image are important in picture books, these two elements must be distinct from each other on the page. Distinguishable letters and words help children make that connection between text and meaning, and it also helps them understand that text, while visual, is very different from pictures (Neuman et al., 2000). Specifically, distinguishable letters and words in picture books aid mastery of the alphabetic principle. It is important that children be able to “see and compare letters” for “efficient and easy learning” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 67).

Distinguishable letters and words also help children learn about general concepts of reading and writing. Proper and varying types of punctuation expose children to the idea of punctuation, sentence structure, and units of meaning: “Without adults drawing attention to paragraph breaks, punctuation, lowercase and uppercase letters, and other such features of text, children typically do not give them much notice” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 67). When reading picture books, children can see where words start and finish and how reading occurs from left to right and from top to bottom (Neuman et al., 2000). Through these experiences, children are more empowered to try reading and writing on their own.

While picture books should be print rich, each page should not be cluttered with words. When children are in an environment overwhelmed with print, “letters and words become just so much wallpaper” and children are less likely to make the connection between words and meaning (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 38). In all, there needs to be a good balance of picture and text, and knowing how to accurately break up the text over a number of pages is often quite a challenge for authors and editors (Litowinsky, 2001).

Rich, Well-chosen Vocabulary

Because preschoolers experience an “unparalleled” growth in vocabulary at their ages, picture books are a great medium to expose children to new words and their meanings (Searson, 1999, p. 64). Through the text, children are introduced to new words, and these words’ meanings are demonstrated through pictures.

Introducing new vocabulary is often best done in thematic chunks. For instance, a book about the first day of school can introduce new words like ‘teacher,’ ‘cafeteria,’ and ‘notebook.’ Because of the overall theme of the book, the reader learns not only what these new vocabulary words mean but also how they relate to each other. The meanings and relations solidify throughout the reading experience, and readers gain the confidence to experiment with these new words in different contexts outside the book-reading experience (Neuman et al., 2000).

Just as with distinguishable text, a picture book should not be cluttered with challenging vocabulary. The goal is for children to not only be exposed to new vocabulary but also be able to master these new words, so an appropriate picture book has a select

number of new vocabulary words that are repeated throughout the story (Searson, 1999, p. 64).

Language to Develop Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Picture books with text with varying structure, word length, sounds, and word combinations are great tools to help preschoolers develop phonological and phonemic awareness. Language to help phonemic awareness is especially important given that this skill is not developed naturally and requires the aid of teachers and caregivers (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007). Therefore rhyme, alliteration, and any element that points out the different structural parts of words and their effect on sound are great additions to a picture book: “Children learn to pay attention to the sounds in spoken language through rhymes, chants, nonsense words, and poetry” (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007, p. 222). Rhymes and alliteration help children make connections between words that sound alike and their different meanings. The rhythmic sayings and songs in picture books are often quite memorable, so children are likely to continue repeating them over and over even after the book is read (Strasser and Seplocha, 2007; Neuman et al., 2000).

Predictive Text and Storyline

An appropriate story and story progression are also important elements for picture books. First (and almost obviously), a picture book must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The story should come to a “swift resolution and end on a positive note,” and the story

should progress rather quickly (Jalongo, 2004, p. 129). An efficient story progression keeps children attentive through the reading process (Neuman et al., 2000). This structure also teaches the child about story endings and proper storytelling structure: when children tell their own stories, they'll learn not to "meander along" but come to an appropriate and timely resolution (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 36).

At the same time, the story should be predictive and logical (Jalongo, 2004). Particularly at the preschool age, children will pick up books and pretend to read, flipping through the pages and recounting as much of the story as they can remember (Jalongo, 2004; Neuman et al., 2000). When the story is predictive and the text and pictures have a strong correlation on the page, children are able to use visual cues and their knowledge of specific letters and words to guide themselves independently through the story-telling process (Neuman et al., 2000). When children are able to follow along in the story during independent readings, they "gain a sense of accomplishment" and are more likely to continue reading books (Jalongo, 2004, p. 102).

Robust, Coherent Images

As previously said in the definition of a picture book, the pictures must be able to stand alone and tell a story. Just as the text should be predictive, the images should be coherent and logical as well. They should be ordered in a consecutive, easy-to-follow manner, and they should be rich in content (Neuman et al., 2000). A preschool-age child who does not know how to read text should be able to pick up a picture book and imagine the story through the pictures. This challenges the reader to use his own vocabulary and

knowledge to figure out how to communicate the story (Neuman et al., 2000). It also gets the reader accustomed to the reading process, for it reinforces the left-to-right reading practice (Neuman et al., 2000).

As children begin to recognize text and words, they can use the text and pictures together to decipher the story. A high-quality picture book, then, will have images that strongly correlate with whatever text is on the page (Neuman et al., 2000). The action and mood conveyed in the illustrations should complement the action and mood described in the text (Jalongo 2004).

Robust images also convey to early readers that pictures and other elements beside text can convey meaning, and that communication comes in all forms. As Kiefer (1988) said, "as children communicate with and about picture books they seem to develop a growing awareness of aesthetic factors and of the artist's role in choosing these factors to express meaning" (p. 264). Young children learn that strong communication involves many important decisions, and each element must be chosen with care and consideration.

Culturally-Reflective

In considering the literacy goals of preschool-age children, we must also be conscious of other aspects of their development. Children at this age are "egocentric" and the literature they engage with must recognize the child's point of view (Searson, 1999, p. 66). Searson (1999) elaborates:

The egocentric child perceives the world from his or her perspective and has difficulty taking on the viewpoint of

others. ... As children's perspective broadens, they come to understand that there is a whole world out there, comprising many people, all of whom have their own feelings and experiences. ... However, fully developed decentering does not occur until the child reaches the school years, ages six to twelve. Therefore, preschoolers prefer books that celebrate the world that they know best, which includes the family, home, and neighborhood. (p. 66)

Jalongo (2004) further notes, "books enable the newly socialized child to explore interpersonal relationships and human motives" (p. 8). Books help children explore different life scenarios, and the characters in the book "model coping strategies" that children can employ in the real world (Jalongo, 2004, p. 8).

As noted before, literacy develops through meaningful experiences. The reading process occurs in the context of the reader's physical, mental and social environment, and it is absolutely important the children feel safe and comfortable while reading (Neuman et al., 2000). Books that "affirm children's family experiences and their cultural and linguistic backgrounds" allow for more enthusiastic "engagement and progress" in developing literacy (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 39). An enjoyable reading experience will "shape a fondness for literature and reading for the remainder of the child's life" (Searson, 1999, p. 65); a less than engaging experience will cause children to lose interest and not continue a healthy habit of reading (Jalongo, 2004). Jalongo's (2004) "iceberg" conception of literacy is particularly compelling:

Literacy seems to operate on the "iceberg principle"—that is, that knowledge and skills are only its visible tip. Dispositions and feelings make up the substantial portion that lies beneath the surface. Emphasizing knowledge and skills to the exclusion of dispositions and feelings results in an *alliterate* population.

In other words, it produces learners who know how to read but refuse to. (p. 21)

Good Teaching and Engagement

The position statement from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1998) strongly claims that the most important activity for developing literacy is reading aloud to emergent readers. While this is a major claim, it is not unfounded. As Neuman et al. (2000) state, “literacy does not just emerge naturally,” but it emerges with the careful guidance of parents, teachers, and others in a child’s world (p. 1). Children must be guided in their exposures to print, but they must also be allowed the freedom to explore and discover on their own.

The best reading experiences occur when children are in an emotionally secure environment and have “positive, nurturing relationships with adults who engage in responsive conversations” (Neuman et al., 2000, p. 16). When teachers, parents, and others read aloud to children, they should take advantage of opportunities to convey meaning and strengthen the connection between words and meaning. They can point to pictures to help explain words, act out a particular verb or scenario, or stop to explain what a word means (Neuman et al., 2000).

When reading aloud to children, it is also important that children are invited to actively participate in the reading process (Jalongo, 2004; Neuman et al., 2000). Active participation comes in many forms: answering “predictive and analytic questions,” discussing the pictures and actions, sharing favorite parts or favorite characters, and retelling the story (Neuman et al., 2000). This type of discussion is important in bridging

the gap between imagined and real worlds. Children get valuable practice in using their ever-increasing vocabulary, and they learn how to best communicate and share what they want to say (Jalongo, 2004). Conversation between child and adult and even child and child can challenge children to find new ways of expressing themselves when others don't understand (Neuman et al., 2000).

Choosing which book to read at a certain time is also a key decision that must be dutifully considered (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). Teachers, parents, and other caregivers should pay careful attention to the content of the book. Books are a great way to build on a child's existing knowledge about the world, and they can also serve as a great introduction to new material. For example, a teacher might read a story about going to the zoo before a class trip to the zoo, so that students are primed with zoo-related vocabulary, know what to expect, and are better able to engage in the field trip experience (Neuman et al., 2000). Neuman et al. (2000) also recommend that both fiction and nonfiction books be read to children. Each reading experience is an opportunity for children to apply and add to what they already know.

Here, the burden lies less on the physical material itself and more on exactly how that material is used. While the teaching and engagement aspect of a picture book is not inherent in the physical book itself, we must remember that books are first and foremost read, used, looked at. The combined effects of a high-quality reading experience with a high-quality book were well-documented in Keifer's (1988) observation of pre-school and kindergarten classrooms reading *Hiroshima No Pika* by Toshi Maruki:

The talking, reading, drawing and writing that went on during this unit gave children many opportunities for comparing, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating these multisensory

experiences and provided the time for ideas and feelings to incubate and deepen. (p. 267)

Keifer (1988) notes another important aspect of the reading process: time. She says,

Teachers took time to read to children, not once but several times a day. During these read-aloud sessions teachers gave children time (sometimes as much as a minute of silence) to look at books and to think about the experience. Teachers also provided time for discussion; many of the read-aloud sessions took as long as fifty minutes. Finally, teachers recognized the importance of days and weeks in engendering response and so would return to a book for a third or even fourth reading as children brought new insights and experiences to the process. (Kiefer, 1988, p. 267)

Kiefer's (1988) observations show how literacy moments build on each other. Each experience reinforces past knowledge and teachings, and children come to be excited by the new insights and connections they make while reading.

The Children's Book Industry

While we've gotten a sense of what determines developmentally appropriate picture books from inadequate ones, this discussion would be incomplete without a look at the children's book industry. This institution determines which books are published, which books never get printed at all, and which books fall into the hands of growing children. It is a multi-billion dollar industry that publishes about 14,000 titles annually (Tunnell and Jacobs, 2003).

However, the developmental appropriateness of a picture book isn't always the book publisher's priority. As in any industry, profit rules all, for without income, publishers

would cease to exist. As Elleman (1998) said, there is a “bottom-line phobia” plaguing the publishing industry (p. 44). This preoccupation with sales is reflected very much in the entire process in accepting or rejecting a manuscript. When editors receive a manuscript, they are considering the manuscript's selling potential. Particularly in major publishing companies, if the editors believe the book will sell, they will write up a profit and loss statement and consult with the marketing department (Elleman, 1998).

In all, because there is such a focus on sales, we cannot assume all preschool-targeted picture books are high quality and developmentally appropriate. Mela Bolinao, an children's illustrator agent in New York City, said that because everything in the industry is so profit-driven, the creativity process is hindered. So, to what extent do publishing practices align with educationally appropriate goals? We will investigate. I will first provide an overview of important aspects of the current children's book industry before moving on to the various factors that determine whether a manuscript is accepted by a publisher.

Past and Present in the Children's Literature Industry

The idea of children's literature is actually a relatively new concept, having only developed in the past century and a half. The first literary materials for children were seen more as "toys" than they were as "books"—they were instructional in nature, like primers or prayer books, so they were "often thought of as objects to be used, rather than read" (Fitzsimmons, 2012, p. 85). Because they were first seen as objects and not books, children's literature struggled to gain legitimacy in society. If a book was designated for

children, it was long-considered "lowbrow" no matter its quality (Fitzsimmons, 2012, p. 85).

However, in 1850 the free library movement began in the United States, and librarians particularly focused on building high-quality collections of books that all children could access (Fitzsimmons, 2012). For over a century, libraries and schools were the major buyers of children's books. Being librarians and teachers, these book buyers were adept at choosing books that were of high quality and developmentally appropriate for their readers (Fitzsimmons, 2012). Librarians worked to introduce a standard for children's literature. For instance, the first director of the Central Children's Room at the New York City Public Library, Anne Moore, developed a list of children's book titles that she deemed classic and must-haves for all children's libraries across the nation—a canon of children's literature was born (Fitzsimmons, 2012, p. 86). So, for a long time, there was a strong connection between a book's developmental and educational value and its sales.

But in the past 25 years there has been a major shift in how children's books are sold, prompting us to re-evaluate the quality of the current children's book population. One of the most impactful changes in the children's book industry was the shift from an institutional market to a retail market (Goodale, 1996). Since the rise of children's literature in the 1900s, schools and libraries were the major market audiences for children's books, making up about 95% of all children's book sales (Fitzsimmons, 2012). However, in the 1970s schools and libraries lost funding, slowing down book sales to these institutions (Tunnell and Jacobs, 2013). At the same time, baby boomer parents with their "gourmet kids," would spare no expense in creating a complete at-home library of picture

books (Goodale, 1996, p. B1). Now, the market is split between institutional and retail, with retail sales making up just over half of all sales (Tunnell and Jacobs, 2013).

On top of this, the past century has seen a growing emphasis on bestseller status, a rise in the importance of popularity. Starting in the late 1800s, many publications that put forth a list of bestsellers—the most well-known being the *New York Times*—and in the beginning they were mostly used for industry purposes (Fitzsimmons, 2012). But then consumers started to take notice of these lists. During tough economic times (especially during war) when people had limited spending money, Americans turned to these bestselling lists to know which where the “right” books to read and spend money on (Fitzsimmons, 2012, p. 89). A book’s critical acclaim and the opinions of experts like teachers and librarians became less important as Americans “began to look to their neighbors and popular sentiment” (Fitzsimmons, 2012, p. 89). Fitzsimmons (2012) notes a distinction in the bestseller list that mass society does not quite catch: the list does not definitively broadcast which books are best, but which books are selling best. It is easy, then, to picture the well-intending parent referring to the *New York Times* Bestselling Picture Book list, buying the top titles, and believing they have bought the best literature out there for their child.

The rise of the bestseller is just another reason publishers are so sales-driven. When a book sells well and gets on the coveted *New York Times* list, there is usually an increase in sales in the following weeks, and the economic effects compound (Fitzsimmons, 2012). Especially now, when publishers are printing only about fifteen children’s books per season (half of what they used to print), bestseller status is crucial: “they want to make sure that at least five or six are best-sellers to support the other books,” says Bolinao (2015).

Factors That Influence Whether A Manuscript is Accepted

We've established that sales is a major priority for publishers. So, what sells? Here I will address the factors that influence a publisher's decision-making. I will also assess how each factor might influence the predominance of developmentally-appropriate literature in the children's book population.

Front-line Readers and Consumers of Picture Books

Before a picture book ever gets into the hands of a child, it has to gain the approval of editors and publishers. These people have their own literary tastes and standards for the perfect picture book. For instance, editor and publisher James Gribbin (2005) advised aspiring authors not to use rhyme and alliteration: "Don't rely on cute names like Billy Beaver and Wanda Weasel for characterization. It's what the animals *do* in the story that will make them memorable, not what they're called" (114-115). Gribbin (2005) misses a key point in child literacy development: children play with both the plot and the words themselves. Rhyme and alliteration help children build phonemic awareness and make distinctions between different words, spellings, and meanings. Alliterative names may be annoying to the adult reader, but their sound when spoken aloud and their presentation on the printed page are great for the emergent preschool reader.

Olga Litowinsky (2001), a former executive editor at Simon & Schuster, has similar views to Giblin. Litowinsky (2001) recommends aspiring authors not use alliterative names because it is insulting to the integrity of the world of fine literature:

It was Walt Disney and other cartoonists of the 1930s and 1940s who used alliterative names like Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Bugs Bunny. Although these characters are successful and beloved, they are not book characters but come from comic books and cartoon features and lack the literary stature of such book characters as Kenneth Grahame's Mr. Toad and Lewis Carroll's March Hare. In short, don't be *condescending*. Respect the reader, no matter what age he is. (58)

Again, there is no mention of the child's developmental needs. Litowinsky's (2001) comments also highlight the ongoing conflict of legitimacy in juvenile literature. How is it possible to write a 'real' book for the three-year-old in an industry that prides itself on high-brow quality, an industry that was first created for the educated adult reader?

This preoccupation with traditional industry standards—which may not be appropriate for juvenile readers—is also seen in Litowinsky's (2001) discussion of verse:

Like a poem, a picture book is short, tells a story, and captures an emotional moment. It shows a love of language and has memorable imagery. But it also reflects the literary era in which we live, which is why editors say they don't want to publish books in verse. By *verse*, they mean sing-song verses like those in "A Visit from St. Nicholas," which they regard as old-fashioned. Some editors have gone so far as to shy away from even the best of verses because they don't trust their own judgment.

So verse is either too old-school or too intimidating to publish. Either way, the absence of verse means the absence of a literary element that has proved quite effective in helping emergent readers develop literacy.

Editors are not the only 'front-line' readers of picture books. We also have to consider the market. Before the shift from an institutional to a retail market publishers had to appeal to an arguably more academically critical market. School officials and librarians tend to have keener eyes for the developmental appropriateness of academic materials. But now it's parents, grandparents, caregivers, and anyone else who is going to the bookstore and picking up a picture book (Jalongo, 2004). But what interests adults does not always interest children. For instance, adults may not respond to the type of humor seen in developmentally appropriate preschool books; they may pass over these books in favor of a juvenile title that is actually written for an adult audience (Jalongo 2004). Publishers are looking for ways to capture these audiences in order to make the sale: "[Parents] are drawn to characters remembered from their childhoods, books that have 'sweet' pictures, and stories with television and movie tie-ins" (Elleman, 1998, p. 45). Publishers make easy sales when they repackage timeless characters like Winnie the Pooh or Curious George. The priority is not on the creation of good literature, but on capturing the hearts and cash of the adults: "sophisticated picture books aimed more at the collector, the impulse buyer, or the gift-giver than at children have proliferated" (Elleman, 1998, p. 45).

Potential for Recognition

Publishers are likely to pick up a book they think would be a contender for a prestigious award, like the Newbery or Caldecott awards. Scouting out the next award-winning book is just another way in which publishers are focusing on bottom-line sales. A prestigiously-awarded book is likely to become a classic and will continue to print for years to come (Hill, White, and Brodie, 2001). Teachers and librarians rely on awards lists to know which books they should buy and feature in their curriculums (Hill, White, and Brodie, 2001). Also, young children are often drawn to the shiny award seals on the covers of these books, which are already likely to be prominently placed in bookstores and libraries because of their award status (Hill, White, and Brodie, 2001). In all, an award would guarantee a book a good amount of sales and the publisher something to happily boast.

A focus on award-winning potential is a good sign for the predominance of developmentally appropriate material, since the editor's attention will focus on the quality of the book. Newberry and Caldecott medals are awarded to books with stories and illustrations that have "child appeal" (Hill, White, and Brodie, 2001, p. 4). For both awards, the judges appreciate the author or illustrator's consideration of the juvenile audience, for the books must be appropriate for children between 0 and 14 years old. Newbery Award-winning books often have excellent plot development, clear presentation, and outstanding introduction of a child-appropriate theme (Hill, White, and Brodie, 2001). We can count on a Newberry Award-winning picture book to have a quality plot and progression that would aid in children's literacy development. Caldecott Awards focus on illustrations, and Caldecott-winning books are recognized for their "excellence of pictorial interpretation of story" and "appropriateness of style of illustration to the story" (Hill, White, and Brodie,

2001, p. 5). A Caldecott-winning picture book then, is likely to have strong cohesion between picture and text, an incredibly important aspect for developmentally appropriate picture books. In a world of so many books, it is difficult to evaluate each and every new book. Gravitating towards the award-winning books, then, might be an easy and effective way to ensure a quality reading experience.

Clout

The author's clout, including celebrity status, reputation, number of awards, and past book-selling success is very important in making the decision to accept a manuscript or not (Elleman, 1998). When the book is attached to a celebrity, you can be sure that it will be a bestseller. This is problematic for many reasons.

First, quality is not guaranteed. Celebrities are often new to the children's publishing scene—they've accomplished many other things, and think that it's now time to write a bestselling book so they can add 'author' to their repertoire (Lamont and Muchamore, 2014). Because they are new to the juvenile literature industry, they underestimate the true art and skill involved in creating a children's book:

How many words were there in *Goodnight Moon*? A hundred?
It's seen as easy work, a short cut to reputation-padding
bibliography. And this is offensive (isn't it?) to the children's
authors who devote themselves to writing for developing
minds; who agonise; who know that, actually, those 100 words
of *Goodnight Moon* are just perfect. (Lamont and Muchamore,
2014)

Celebrities who want to publish a children's book for their own status pose a threat to developmentally appropriate literature and to the overall legitimacy of the children's literature world.

Also, because the revenue potential is so obvious, the celebrity's book would get picked over other, potentially higher quality, books. As Lamont and Muchamore (2014) note, "if just one Mini Grey or Anthony Browne has been lost to children's literature thanks to ... Gloria Estefan's *Noelle the Bulldog*, it hasn't been worth it." Publishers do not have an unlimited publishing capacity. For each imprint, typically less than 20 titles are published each season (Bolinao 2015). So for every poor-quality celebrity book accepted, another potentially higher quality book is being crowded out. Those quality authors may never get their chance to make an impact in children's literacy.

Content Trends

In all, everyone is looking for the next blockbuster, to capitalize on whatever current craze is going on. A good example of this is multi-cultural story trend in the 1990s. James GIBLIN (2005), an established editor and publisher of children's books, notes how the institutional market started to demand more children's books that reflected the diversity of the current United States population. He talks of this great renaissance of multicultural book publishing that focused on producing stories that "correct false impressions" and are "more complete and authentic" (Giblin, 2005, p. 100). Great authors, illustrators, and literary classics emerged, all thanks to the demands of educators. However, what was missing from Giblin's (2005) discussion was any mention of child development and the

needs of children. While the multicultural trend has no doubt contributed to developmentally appropriate literature for children (as it affirms the child's home culture and environment), this positive side effect for children came about through market demands and trends. The buyers—the institutional market of teachers and librarians—determine market demands. This example emphasizes how important it is to have consumers that are informed of child development needs.

Trends come and go, and some may naturally promote developmentally appropriate practice. But as Karl (1982) reminds us, "Surface changes—subjects and styles that move like ripples on a pond—have little to do with deep underlying assessments of what is good" (p. 204). There is plenty of opportunity to make the next dystopian teen read or book on zombies a developmentally appropriate choice for readers. However, sometimes publishers may be in too much of a rush to capitalize on the trend, so quality suffers.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Moving Forward

In all, it is clear that publishing practices are not completely aligned with developmentally appropriate practice when it comes to children's picture book production. It would be easy to place the burden of change on publishers. However, publishing companies are first and foremost businesses. Sales is crucial to survival, and it would not be fair to say that all publishers need to do is shift their practices without market prompt. It is not solely on the shoulders of the publishing industry to inspire a renewed readership of and prioritization for developmentally appropriate literature. This involves a more widespread cultural change.

Understanding the publishing industry introduces new opportunities to improve our own practice and policy. Being up to date on industry trends and pressures can inform how we go about increasing the quality of published children's books. For instance, now that we know there was a big shift from an institutional to retail market, it is clearer than ever that parents and caregivers must be informed about their child's developmental needs. We cannot rely on librarians and teachers anymore, for they are not the only source of books. Parents must be educated about the importance of developmentally appropriate practice, the difference between high quality and low quality books, and how they can impact the book market by voting with their dollar. Parents are the new librarians.

But that is not to say that the role of librarians and teachers is obsolete. Educators can work with parents and caregivers and teach them how to choose books that are appropriate for their child. Schools might host workshops and information sessions for parents, with separate workshops for each grade and/or reading level. A well-informed customer base is key to changing market demands for the better. Publishers will be happy to shift their focus to developmentally appropriate practice if they see that is where the money is.

Another way to approach this issue is to reinforce the importance of schools and libraries. The juvenile literature market shifted to a retail market because schools and libraries lost funding. More funding for these institutions would help them gain more control over the market. This would prompt publishers to pay more attention to the demands of well-informed teachers and librarians. If more library funding is not an option, we might look toward community-level campaigns to encourage children and parents to use their libraries more often. We should also turn our attention to making libraries more

accessible to all children, especially at-risk populations of children whose parents may be less informed about developmentally-appropriate practice than the average parent.

Just as a picture book combines text and image to tell a story that is greater than the sum of its parts, we must look at all aspects of the children's book industry and how they interact with each other. This will bring developmentally appropriate practice to the forefront.

Appendix 1: Analysis of *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown

Overview: *Goodnight Moon*, written by Margaret Wise Brown and illustrated by Clement Hurd, is considered a classic in children's literature. Written in 1947, it is still one of the most popular children's books today, especially for bedtime! The back of the book suggests it is appropriate for children from newborn to three years of age, so it is recommended for young preschool age children.

Notes on developmentally appropriate practice:

- **Distinguishable letters and words:** The book's text stands separate from the book's images—there is great distinction between the words and the pictures. The words and letters are big enough for a young child to see and distinguish, though there is very little punctuation.
- **Rich text and vocabulary:** The book certainly abides by the recommendation that text be simple and straightforward, letting images convey details and description. The story is a goodnight ode to the many objects in a child's room, with "goodnight" repeated on every page and new nouns introduced in every scene. These nouns are objects that one often finds in the home. So while the vocabulary is new, the words all share the same theme that makes them memorable in the child's mind.
- **Language to develop phonological and phonemic awareness:** *Goodnight Moon* makes excellent use of rhythm, rhyme, repetition and verse. The rhyme especially helps to point out differences in similar-sounding words, like "kittens" and "mittens" and "socks" and "clocks" (Brown, 1947, p. 5, 18).
- **Predictive text and storyline:** Because the story is a repetition of "Goodnight [noun]" a child reading independently would easily be able to follow along with the story and the pictures. The story makes a natural progression from the beginning of bedtime to the end of bedtime, when the character finally falls asleep.
- **Robust images:** The images correspond well to the text on the page. Each of the nouns introduced in the text are depicted in the images, so readers are able to connect new vocabulary with its visual representation and meaning.
- **Culturally reflective:** *Goodnight Moon* addresses a universal ritual for children: falling asleep. It is set in the home and features objects often found in the home, like family members, toys, and a hairbrush. Children are likely to respond well to the storyline because it is easy for them to imagine themselves as the main character going to bed.

In all, *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Wise Brown is a fantastic, developmentally appropriate book for children.

Appendix 2: Analysis of *Hug* by Jez Alborough

Overview: *Hug* by Jez Alborough is a book targeted to children ages 1-4. Published in 2009, it is fairly popular, possibly in part due to Alborough's status as an established children's author and illustrator. A defining feature of the book is that it uses only one word: hug.

Notes on developmentally appropriate practice:

- **Distinguishable letters and words:** Each page features the word "hug" prominently in word bubbles next to the character that is saying the word. It is easy to see the spelling of the word "hug" as well as each individual letter. The words are distinguishable from the pictures. There is no punctuation.
- **Rich text and vocabulary:** *Hug* quite intentionally features limited vocabulary. What may be lost in vocabulary growth is redeemed in the reader's growing awareness of the many nuanced ways a word can be said. With each reading of the word "hug," the tone changes and the word takes on new meaning.
- **Language to develop phonological and phonemic awareness:** Because it features only one word, *Hug* is not the best choice for developing phonological and phonemic awareness. The words in *Hug* are monosyllabic and do not serve to point out similarities and differences in construction and sound.
- **Predictive text and storyline:** The storyline has a natural progression, and (obviously) very predictive text. A young reader could successfully read this book independently, especially if they've already experienced the book with adult aid.
- **Robust images:** The images prove absolutely crucial, for they help to convey the many meanings and emotions that can be associated with the word "hug." Alborough's illustrations do not disappoint. The character Bobo's facial expressions and body language accurately portray each emotional moment.
- **Culturally reflective:** *Hug* reflects a common emotional progression that many (if not all) young children experience. Bobo is at first happy to witness acts of parent-child love. He soon grows anxious because he is not able to hug his own mother at the moment. In the end, he is comforted and happy again when he is reunited with his mother and is finally able to hug her. *Hug* models how these emotions play out and how they can be resolved in a satisfying way.

In all, *Hug* intentionally lacks some common features of developmentally appropriate literature in order to focus more intensely on other literacy goals. This shows how developmentally appropriate picture books are not cookie-cutter—there is no one right recipe for a good picture book, though they should feature at least some of the components previously described in this paper.

Appendix 3: Analysis of *The Book With No Pictures* by B. J. Novak

Overview: *The Book With No Pictures* was written by B. J. Novak, already a very well-known person in the entertainment industry. Novak seems to be a classic example of the celebrity author. Both his adult book and his picture book were instant bestsellers. Despite having no pictures, it is considered a picture book (discussed below). It is recommended for ages five to eight, so it is targeted to older preschoolers.

Notes on developmentally appropriate practice:

- **Distinguishable letters and words:** This is one of the book's greatest strengths. The book intends for the reader to learn that text can be just as fun, meaningful, and magical as pictures. The words are featured prominently on the page, there is varying punctuation, and the text comes in varying sizes, fonts, and emphases. In all, there is a great focus on the text's visual presentation on paper.
- **Rich text and vocabulary:** *The Book With No Pictures* introduces lots of vocabulary words (boring, serious, monkey, robot, blueberry, etc.). However, the randomness of the storyline does not ground these vocabulary words in a particularly memorable context. Readers may be exposed to lots of words in this book, but the book very much depends on the reader's prior knowledge of this vocabulary in order to understand the story.
- **Language to develop phonological and phonemic awareness:** This book features some rhyme and made up words. These features help develop phonological and phonemic awareness, especially when reading with an adult. However, this book lacks repetition—a missed opportunity to keep returning to key moments for literacy development.
- **Predictive text and storyline:** The storyline is not predictive. There are memorable moments that children may be able to identify in the story. However, there is no typical conflict-resolution that preschool age children can grasp. Novak intended for the book to be read by an adult to a child: with the way the words are set up on the page, the book requires an advanced reader. Children may find it hard to read this book independently.
- **Robust images:** Just as the title implies, this book has no traditional pictures. However, Novak takes this opportunity to show how the text itself can be visually expressive.
- **Culturally reflective:** The book has an interesting play with the relationship between the assumed adult reader and the child who has "chosen" this book. But at the same time, it's not particularly strong with an ego-centric character and theme. It requires a level of abstract thought that preschoolers might not be ready for quite yet. The book does not quite touch on important emotional, cultural, or psychological moments.

Bottom line, it's a fine book. There are some aspects of it that are developmentally appropriate, but the ways in it does not achieve developmentally appropriate standards can be detrimental to the reading experience. There are much more robust, developmentally appropriate books out there to read. Novak's book seems to be a fantastic example of how celebrity status influences what people think is good and worthy to read.

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