

The Impact of Choice During a Free Pop Up Book Fair

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ABSTRACT

Page by Page is an international, youth-led literacy organization run by children for children. Co-founded in April 2016, it now operates in all fifty states and more than ten countries, and has distributed roughly 750,000 books valued at over \$3.6 million through about 150 physical book drives, keeping 1.1 million pounds of books in circulation and reaching an estimated 3.1 million people. The organization runs a virtual library for students at underserved schools, partners with roughly thirty three local nonprofits including Big Brothers Big Sisters of Miami, Breakthrough Miami, Camillus House, and Chapman Partnership, and works with Worldreader on the BookSmart app. It also produced the Page by Page Student Literacy Leadership Handbook, which the Florida Afterschool Program adopted as a statewide after school program. Among its programs is the free pop-up book fair, the subject of this paper. A pop-up fair takes the familiar structure of a school book fair, tables of donated books sorted by age and genre, bags waiting at the door, and removes the price. At the fair described here, held at Gulliver Preparatory in Miami, about two thousand donated books were laid out and children were told to take as many as they could carry.

This paper argues that the value of that model is not the transfer of books but the transfer of choice. It first explains how the studies reviewed here were selected. It then reviews evidence on unequal access to print, self-determination theory, experimental work on choice and intrinsic motivation, and a randomized trial in seventeen high-poverty Florida schools in which students who selected their own summer books outperformed peers who received none. It then offers a set of design suggestions for running a fair, identified as the author's own reasoning rather than as findings, and proposes a study that would separate choice from access.

INTRODUCTION

A small child had slipped past in the crowd, and was handed one of the hundreds of bags stacked by the door. Behind her, two thousand donated books covered the tables of an auditorium at Gulliver Preparatory in Miami, sorted by age and genre. It looked like any school book fair. Nothing on the tables was for sale, and it took the children a while to believe it. How many can I take? As many as you want. The question kept coming all night, and it kept catching one off guard, because the children were not asking permission to have a book. They were asking permission to decide.

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This paper proceeds in five moves. It begins with how the sources were chosen, then establishes the access problem a free fair is understood to solve, then turns to the theory and experimental evidence on choice, then examines the Florida evidence and the limits of what it can establish, and closes with two applications: a set of design suggestions offered as reasoning rather than as findings, and a study that would separate access from choice.

SCOPE AND SELECTION OF SOURCES

This is a narrative review rather than a systematic one. The studies were chosen by the author against three requirements set by the question itself. The first was evidence that children in low-income neighborhoods actually encounter fewer books, since the premise of a free fair depends on it, and Neuman and Celano (2001) was selected because it measures the print environment directly rather than inferring it from household income. The second was a theory of why choosing might matter beyond the book itself, together with experimental tests of it. Deci and Ryan (2000) supplies the theory; Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) was preferred to any single choice experiment because it pools forty-one studies and reports moderators, including participant age and the number of options, that bear directly on how a fair is run; and Gambrell (1996) and Guthrie and Humenick (2004) tie that literature to reading. The third was field evidence involving children rather than laboratory participants, which Allington et al. (2010), Kim (2006), and Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) supply, and whose designs differ in ways that let them be read against one another.

Sources were located through database searches and through the reference lists of those studies. Two limits follow. No formal protocol was followed and no unpublished literature was sought, so null results are likely underrepresented, and the selection was guided by an argument the author already held, so the sample may favor evidence consistent with it.

THE ACCESS PROBLEM

The value of a free pop-up book fair is not the transfer of books. It is the transfer of choice. The design is what matters here: free books, and the decision of which ones to take. Book fairs are retail operations, and retail goes where there is money to spend, which means the schools that most need one are the least likely to host one. Neuman and Celano (2001) spent a year documenting the print environments of four neighborhoods, two low-income and two middle-income, in the same city. They counted signs, books in stores, school libraries, and public library branches. Children in the low-income neighborhoods did not simply own fewer books. They saw fewer, and the ones they encountered came almost entirely from public institutions that were also poorly funded. In the largest comparison the researchers drew, the poorest neighborhood offered roughly one age-appropriate title for every three hundred children, while the middle-income neighborhood offered something closer to thirteen titles per child. Scarcity that heavy not only eliminates availability, but it eliminates selection.

WHY CHOICE MATTERS

Why the decision should matter is best explained by Self-Determination Theory. Deci and Ryan (2000) argue that motivation is not one thing a person has more or less of. It comes in kinds, and the kinds depend on three needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the one that matters here. It does not mean independence or the absence of adults. It means the experience of one's own behavior as self-endorsed rather than imposed from outside. Motivation from a rule or a reward lasts about as long as the rule or the reward does. Motivation that is autonomous gets internalized, and it keeps working when nobody is checking. A child handed a book she did not pick can still read it. A child who picked the book is doing something she chose to do, and choice changes the relationship to the object. Summer is when that difference should show up, because summer is when the rules and the rewards of school are gone. Gambrell (1996) found a version of this in classrooms: when students were asked to name the book they had most enjoyed, roughly eighty percent named one they had chosen for themselves.

The classroom research also plays into the research done by Guthrie and Humenick (2004), synthesizing twenty-two studies, providing a range of reading choices as one of four practices that reliably raise both reading motivation and reading achievement. Patall, Cooper, and Robinson (2008) went broader, pooling forty-one experimental studies of choice across many places and finding that offering people a choice enhanced intrinsic motivation, effort, and competence, with a weighted mean effect on intrinsic motivation of $d = .30$, 95% CI [.25, .35]. Their studies ran in labs, classrooms, workplaces, and clinics rather than in reading programs, with people from preschool age through adulthood. The setup was usually the same: one group controlled something about a task, and another did identical work by assignment. Notably for this paper, the effect was larger for children ($d = .55$, 95% CI [.42, .67]) than for adults ($d = .25$, 95% CI [.20, .31]), which is the opposite of what you would expect if choice were an acquired taste. One other finding matters here. More options did not keep making things better, and a manageable set beat an overwhelming one, with three to five options producing the largest effect ($d = .38$, 95% CI [.26, .50]).

THE FLORIDA EVIDENCE

The strongest evidence comes from Florida. Allington et al. (2010) worked with seventeen high-poverty elementary schools, randomly assigning 852 students to receive a dozen self-selected books on the last day of school for three consecutive summers while 478 students from the same schools received none. The children selected their books at a book fair the researchers set up. There was no tutoring, no instruction, no summer program, and no follow-up. That was the whole intervention.

One feature of that design should be said before the results rather than after them. Access and choice vary together, present in the treatment condition and absent in the control condition, so the study can show that self-selected books produced a gain but cannot say how much of it came from the choosing. The figures below support the argument of this paper without confirming it.

On the state reading assessment, the treatment group outperformed the control group, with a statistically significant overall effect ($p = .015$) and an effect size of .14, rising to roughly .21 for the poorest students in the sample, a result the authors compared favorably to summer school cost wise. The article reports these as point estimates without confidence intervals, so how precisely either one is measured cannot be judged from the article itself.

That study carries the weight it does for several reasons. The assignment was random and it happened inside the schools, so the control group came from the same buildings, the same neighborhoods, and the same print environment. What separated them was the books. The outcome was the state reading test, not a survey asking children whether they liked reading more, so nobody could tell an adult what the adult wanted to hear. The intervention is also unusually clean. Most reading programs come with an adult attached, and the adult is always a plausible explanation for any gain. Here there was no adult after the last day of school, so whatever reading happened, happened at home on the child's own schedule, which is what the motivation research predicts. Three summers instead of one tests whether the effect builds instead of fading. And the largest gains came from the poorest students in a sample that was already high poverty, which is what the access argument predicts. An effect size of .14 with no teaching, no staff, and the cost of the books is not the same finding as an effect size of .14 after a summer of instruction.

That result also has to sit next to the rest of the summer reading literature, which is less tidy. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) followed a Baltimore class from first grade into high school and decomposed nine years of test scores into school-year learning and summer learning. Low-income and high-income students gained at similar rates while school was in session. The gap that separated them by ninth grade traced back almost entirely to what happened over the elementary summers. That is the exact window Allington's books were aimed at. But Kim (2006) randomly assigned 552 fourth graders in ten schools to receive eight books over the summer, matched by adults to each child's reading level and stated preferences and mailed out every two weeks. The gains were not uniform. They concentrated among Black students, Latino students, less fluent readers, and children who reported owning fewer than fifty books at home. Read next to Allington, the two studies narrow the claim usefully. Summer is where the damage accumulates, and putting books in a house is not automatically enough to stop it. Something has to make the child open them. Allington's children walked tables and filled their own bags. Kim's children opened a package an adult had packed. That difference is not proof, but it is the difference this paper predicts should matter.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be stated. The first is the one flagged when Allington et al. was introduced. That design mixes access with choice. The children received books and chose them, so the study cannot tell us how much of the gain came from the choosing rather than from simply having twelve books in the house. The comparison with Kim (2006) is suggestive on that point, but the two studies differ in grade level, in the number of books, in delivery method, and in year, so nothing about the contrast isolates

choice either. Also, Leotti and Delgado (2011) found that even thinking about the opportunity to choose activates reward circuitry in the brain. But they scanned adults using money, so extending that to a nine-year-old holding a bag in an auditorium could be considered insufficient.

DESIGNING A FAIR AROUND CHOICE

The confounding in Allington's design is not only that study's problem. It is a question for anyone running a fair, and it has a plausible answer. What follows is the author's own reasoning from the evidence reviewed above rather than a finding drawn from it. No study cited in this paper tests how a fair should be laid out, when bags should be handed out, or how the tables should be ordered, so the suggestions below should be read as hypotheses a fair could test rather than as evidence-based practice. If choice is the active ingredient, or even part of it, then a fair might be built to protect choice rather than efficiency. Prepackaged bags would be faster to hand out and easier to count. Those are real advantages. A prepackaged bag also converts the child from a shopper into a recipient, which is the change the research suggests may be worth avoiding. The ideal is not no organization. It is organization that shapes what a child chooses from instead of choosing for her. Tables sorted by age and genre are organized already, and Patall's finding about the number of options suggests sorting is more likely to help than to hurt. A child in front of one organized table decides more easily than a child in front of two thousand books in no order. The step this paper would leave uncurated is the last one. One option would be to hold the prepackaged bags until late in the fair, when the tables are picked over and a child has just walked in, though the exact timing is a practical guess rather than a tested threshold. The bag itself may matter more than it appears to. A bag is what you carry purchases in. Handing a child an empty one and pointing at the tables communicates the whole premise before anyone has to explain it.

A STUDY THAT WOULD SEPARATE ACCESS FROM CHOICE

The same distinction points to a study that could separate what Allington could not. Take children from the same schools and split them three ways at random. One group gets nothing. One group gets a bag packed for them by adults, matched to the third group on how many books, what reading level, and what genres. The third group picks its own books off the same tables. Access is held even between the second and third groups, and the only thing that differs is who decided. Check the state reading test the following spring, and check what Allington did not, which is how many of the books each child actually opened. If the children who chose read more of what they carried home, then the choosing is doing the work, and the argument stops being an inference.

CONCLUSION

What was observed at the Gulliver fair was narrower than any of the evidence reviewed here and much harder to quantify. It was a room of children discovering that the deciding was theirs. That observation is not evidence, and the study proposed above is how one would find out whether it points at anything.

What the literature does support is a smaller claim. Access and choice are two different things, they are almost always delivered together, and only their combination has been tested in the field. The experimental work on choice suggests the second component is not incidental, and it suggests the effect is larger for children than for adults. Removing the price does more than make the books available. It makes the children customers, and if the choice literature is right about what that does, the difference is worth designing for.

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