

# The Effect of Book Choice on Read-to-Self Engagement

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## Abstract

Elementary teachers who are using “The Daily 5” and/or any independent reading strategy as part of their literacy block often wonder how to select books for their readers and who should do the selecting. This action research focuses on book choice during Read-to-Self time (part of the Daily 5 routine) and how it affects student engagement. There is some discussion on whether students should choose the books they read during Read-to-Self time or if the teacher should choose the books for the students. Some research indicates that teachers should direct the students’ choices of books for Read-to-Self time. Teaching students how to choose “Just Right” books as well as having an organized classroom library that includes organization by interest as well as leveled books would scaffold selection. This study measured and compared the amount of time that students were engaged during Read-to-Self time while reading books that they chose on their own and while reading books that the teacher chose for them using guided reading levels and student interest to guide the teacher’s choices. The third grade students chose books using a “Just Right” model (see Appendix 1, page 25) as well as interest. The teacher chose the books for the kindergarten students, so that each book was at their independent reading level and of interest to the students. This research shows a slight increase in engagement during Read-to-Self time when the teacher chose the books for the kindergarten students, but an increase when third grade students choose their own books.

**Keywords: Read-to-Self, Engagement, Kindergarten, Third Grade, Book Choice**

## **Introduction:**

In 2010 my current school district adopted the Daily 5 reading workshop structure. I was not employed there at the time. When I started there in 2011, I had missed the formal training that many staff members had received. I started by reading The Daily 5 by Boushey and Moser. Upon completing the reading I still had many questions. Should the teacher choose books for “Read-to Self” time that the students are capable of reading or that he/she thinks would hold their attention? Should he/she let his/her students choose their own books? How should a teacher organize his/her classroom library? How many books should a classroom library have? What would the best approach be? When would students be the most engaged in reading? Would the students be more apt to read quietly during the morning or later in the day, as a relaxing activity? All these questions were still unanswered for me. I was able to answer some of these questions through conversations with my peers; however, I received conflicting answers when I asked how to fill my students’ book boxes. I also observed that each teacher had their own way of setting up and organizing their library. The one thing that was consistent was that students needed to build stamina, the ability to stay focused on a task. Were the books in my students’ book boxes affecting their Read-to-Self stamina?

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

One of the strategies that is widely used in elementary classrooms is The Daily 5 structure. The Daily 5 is a structure that is used during the reading/language arts block. It consists of five activities for students to be working

on while the teacher is doing guided reading or working with other students. The five activities are Read-to-Self, Read-to-Someone, Word Work, Listen to Reading, and Work on Writing. Teachers have the responsibility to decide how to make books available to their students for use during their Read-to-Self time and how to assure that students are fully engaged during that time.

Two sisters, Gail Boushey and Joan Moser, often referred to as “The Sisters,” created The Daily 5 structure. To promote student engagement, they suggest creating book boxes for each student so that the students have several books to read during their Read-to-Self time. The books in these boxes are only used during Read-To-Self time. (Boushey and Moser, 2006)

In order to begin to understand what best practice is for today’s students, one needs to ask what has the United States education system done in the past? Some understanding of student engagement and stamina can be reached by investigating the history of reading instruction and the role of “read-to-self” in elementary classrooms.

### **The History of Read-to-Self**

In the past 35 years or so, it has been common practice for teachers to have a daily quiet reading time in their classrooms (Trudel, 2008). In the 1970’s when this author was in grade school, she remembers having a daily silent reading time. The author however, was not a strong reader and remembers wasting that time by visiting with friends or just daydreaming.

Many programs have been tried in the United States in order to help students become life-long readers, such as Sustained Silent Reading, D.E.A.R. Time (Drop

Everything And Read) and Independent Reading time. These programs are very similar to the Read-to-Self component of The Daily 5. In each program students are encouraged to read what they want to read. The difference between these and the Daily 5 is the way things are introduced as well as the accountability that the Daily 5 format offers (Boushey and Moser, 2006).

### **What are kids saying?**

The article, “What Do Kids Think?” reveals that students really like to read when they have the opportunity to pick out the books that they like (Pachtman and Wilson, 2006). Students expressed that the element of choice was important to them because they had certain things that they wanted to learn about (Pachtman and Wilson). The opportunity for the students to choose their own books gave the students a sense of ownership. This ownership fostered a desire in the students to read more and also an enjoyment of reading. One student explained, “I like to choose my own books because sometimes I am in the mood for a sad book, or a happy book or a really different book” (Pachtman and Wilson, 2006, page 683).

In conversations with students about books that they have enjoyed, they often talk about books that they have chosen to read on their own. This observation leads to the conclusion that students are more likely to be engaged and motivated readers if they are given a choice in what they read (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006). Students also need the opportunity to decide after they have started a book that the book is not a good choice for them. They need to be able to stop reading a book that they are not enjoying and start another book. Although, choice is a very

important motivator and reason for engagement, it is recommended that students have guidance in how and what they choose to read (Edmunds and Bauserman, 2006).

### **How should students be guided to choose appropriate books for Read-To-Self time?**

Appropriate books or “Just Right” books hold a child’s interest and are at a comfortable reading level for him/her. There are several ways that teachers can guide a student to select appropriate, “Just Right” books. One way is to teach the students the 5-finger rule. A student chooses a book that he/she thinks will be interesting and opens up the book to the first page and begins reading. When students come to a word that they don’t understand they fold down one of their fingers. They continue to do this as they read the first page. If the student puts down 4 or more fingers before finishing the first page, the book is probably going to be very challenging for the student to read. If the student puts down zero or one finger the book is probably easy for the student to read. The student’s goal would be to find a book that would challenge him a little, evidenced by putting down 2-3 fingers, and was of interest to him/her (Rogers, 2008).

Another approach that can be used in teaching students how to choose “Just Right” books is the BOOKMATCH approach (Wutz and Wedwick, 2005). For this approach to be effective, students ask themselves several questions, based on the acronym, BOOKMATCH: **B**ook length, **O**rdinary language, **O**rganization, prior **K**nowledge, **M**anageable text, **A**ppel of the genre, **T**opic appropriateness,

Connections, and **High interest** (see Appendix 2, page 26). The questions are intended to help the student assess the readability of the book as well as the likelihood that the student will enjoy the book. For example, the questions ask about book length, the student's prior knowledge of the subject, genre and the student's interest level.

A study published in 2006 provides information on who and what motivates a student to read. Students revealed during this study that exciting book covers, action packed plots, and humor play a large role in why they like certain books (Edmundson and Bauserman, 2006). Children also stated that they rely on the school librarian, teachers, family members and peers to recommend books to them that they might like. It is clear that it is important for teachers of reading to be well-read in the area of children's literature. If teachers have read a wide range of books, they will be able to make more appropriate recommendations to their students.

### **How should teachers set up classroom libraries?**

Teachers should have a large selection of books that cover many different interest groups as well as many different reading levels. According to [www.scholastic.com](http://www.scholastic.com), each classroom should have on average of at least 20 books per student. These books should be very diverse and of quality education. Others (Reutzel & Fawson, 2002) suggest that each classroom have between 300 and 600 books. The decision is really up to the classroom teacher. Each classroom should have enough books so that students are able to find books that are at their

independent reading level as well as are of interest to them. Because students often like to read about certain topics that interest them and prefer certain styles of writing, it makes sense for classroom libraries to be organized at least in part by genre or theme (Anderson, Higgins & Wurster, 1985).

### **Are student engaged during Read-to-Self?**

While observing a classroom using The Daily 5 Read-To-Self component, a wide range of student engagement can be found. Some students will be fully engaged and some will not be. In the article “Facilitating Engagement by Differentiating Independent reading,” written by Michelle J. Kelley and Nicki Clausen-Grace (2009) the authors were able to see examples of each of these students in her classroom. Kelley and Clausen-Grace classify each reader in one of eight categories; bookworms, stuck in a genre, I can but I don’t want to (even though I might enjoy it), does non-fiction count?, the fake reader, the challenged reader, the unrealistic or wanna be reader and compliant reader (Kelley and Clausen-Grace). Four of the categories are engaged readers and four of the categories are disengaged readers.

In the author’s classroom “bookworms,” can be found. “Bookworms” are those students who would read regardless of what was going on around them. One would also find the “Stuck in a Genre” readers, those readers who like a certain kind of book and as long as they can find a book in that genre, they will read. Another reader is the “I can but I don’t want to (even though I might enjoy it) reader. These

are the students who just lack a desire to read. Next, are the “Does non-fiction count readers”. These are the students who just want to learn something new.

Each of these four readers are usually engaged while reading. They generally do not require teacher intervention in order to get them to read during Read-to-Self time. However, every classroom also has the students who are not engaged at all during Read-to-Self time. They are the Fake Reader, the Challenged Reader, The Unrealistic or Wanna-be Reader, and the Compliant Reader.

The “Fake Reader” is the student who may or may not have a book open. They may be standing by the bookshelf choosing yet another book to read or they may be just visiting with their neighbor. The next reader is the “Challenged Reader.” The “Challenged Reader” is the student who has always struggled to read. They are usually below grade level and find reading to be a chore. The “Unrealistic or Wanna-be Reader” is the student who is constantly choosing books that are inappropriate for them. They tend to switch books and seldom complete a book. They have mastered decoding but are not able to make meaning from what they are reading. The final reader is the “Compliant Reader.” This reader reads because they have been told to, and reads very random things. They do not think much about reading and rarely read outside of class (Kelley and Clausen-Grace, 2009).

For students who have struggled with reading and do not see themselves as a reader, it is often hard to get them to engage in Read-to-self. According to one study, “these students often deliberately distance themselves from the reading culture and all the behaviors associated with school, from carrying books home for homework to participating in class” (Gulla, 2012, p. 57). It takes a lot of patience and

compassion on the teacher's part to convince these types of students that they can become part of the literate community without losing their own identity. The teacher must make a conscious effort to get to know the student and build a relationship with the student in order to win his/her trust (Gulla, 2012).

Students do not come into kindergarten able to read for long periods of time; however, they can be taught to read for a length of time. Students who are introduced to the word "stamina" and its meaning are able to build stamina for reading. "Jack" is a prime example of this (Gulla, 2012). His teacher started by challenging him to read for just 2 minutes. This became a daily routine. After a month Jack's teacher challenged him to read for 5 minutes. The teacher then became busy conferring with other students and forgot about timing Jack. After about 20 minutes, Jack finally asked if he had read for 5 minutes. He was surprised and proud of himself for having read for 20 minutes.

**Are students more engaged during Read-to-Self time when they choose the books or when the teacher chooses the books for them?**

The one thing that is consistently recommended for unengaged readers is the importance of offering choice. It is recommended by Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2009) that teachers make sure that they themselves are familiar with children's literature in order to be better able to recommend books to their students. It is also recommended that teachers take the opportunity to get to know their students' likes and dislikes and what interests each student (Kelley and Clausen-Grace). Taking away a student's ability to have choices or not offering them in the first place will

decrease intrinsic motivation to read (Patall, Cooper and Robinson, 2008). Lack of choice of reading materials makes students feel like they have no control.

Although choice is definitely necessary for engagement, some exceptions need to be considered. Students need to be able to choose books that are at their own reading level as well as interest. A beginning reader who chooses a chapter book just because he/she sees an older sibling reading one would not be making a good choice. Students need to have guidance in what they are choosing. Making sure that the classroom library is stocked full of good children's literature at a variety of levels will lead to being able to provide students with an ample amount of choices that would benefit them during Read-to-Self time (Gambrell, 2011).

Another recommendation for teachers and librarians is never to tell a student that a book is too hard for them or to insist that a struggling reader only choose books that are on a certain shelf because those are the books at the students' independent reading level. It would be more appropriate for the teacher or librarian to remind the student that they should choose books that they are interested in as well as comfortable reading (Anderson, Higgins & Wurster, 1985).

### **Are students more engaged in Read-to-Self when they participate in the morning or afternoon?**

Read-to-Self is an activity that needs to be practiced daily. Students need to be able to train their muscles to remember what is necessary for them during all Daily 5 activities (Boushey and Moser, 2006). It is important that students practice building stamina; however, a specific time of day is not suggested by "The Sisters."

They believe in giving students the freedom to choose when they participate in “Read-to-Self.” Students in The Sisters’ classrooms choose when to do Read-to-Self with a few things in mind: “What are my goals in reading and writing?” “What will I do first?” “Whom will I work with?” “What will I accomplish?” and “What was I working on yesterday that I want to continue today?” (Boushey and Moser, 2006 p. 20).

Like anything else, reading takes time and practice. Children do not enter kindergarten being able to read or being able to sit still and read for very long. Teachers must take the time to teach them to read and to help them to build stamina. “The Sisters” recommend starting your Read-to-Self time with just 3 minutes. In The Daily Five (2006) Boushey and Moser recommend that children practice reading and building stamina using strategies that will promote cognitive development and positive attitudes related to reading. Teachers need to avoid practices that will support students being off task and “fake” readers. All students need to be engaged and on task in order for stamina to continue and increase.

### **Conclusion:**

This review of the professional literature makes it very clear that students should be given choice in their selection of reading materials, but that a knowledgeable person should guide the student’s choice (Gulla, 2012). They must be knowledgeable about the individual students as well as familiar with a wide range of children’s and adolescent literature. “The Sisters” recommend teaching children about “Just Right” or “Good Fit” books. A “Good Fit” book is a book that is at

the right reading level for the student to be able to practice the reading strategies on which they are working. They use an illustration with shoes. The premise is that a 5 year old can't wear his dad's shoes because they do not fit, and that books are like shoes (Boushey and Moser, 2006). The student must find a book that is a "Good Fit." This research shows that a teacher needs to teach students how to select books that are at their level and also of interest to them. Having a large selection of reading materials available is an important part of being able to provide each student with the appropriate reading material for Read-to-Self time.

### ***Methodology***

#### ***Participants:***

The students participating in this study are five six-year-olds in kindergarten and eight nine-year-olds in third grade. They currently attend a rural elementary school. The study includes seven Caucasian girls, one Hmong girl, seven Caucasian boys, and one boy with two or more ethnicities. At the last testing, each of the Kindergarten students was reading at a level C, and the third grade students were reading between levels I and M, on the Fontas and Pinnell reading chart.

#### ***Setting:***

The study took place at Saint Croix Central Elementary School in Roberts, Wisconsin in two heterogeneous classrooms. One was a kindergarten classroom and one was a third grade classroom. The school currently serves 630 students in grades kindergarten through fourth grade, of which 143 are kindergarten students

and 123 are third grade students. The kindergarten students are separated into seven homerooms and the third grade students are separated into five homerooms.

**Materials:**

The students each have their own “book box.” The students read a variety of leveled books ranging in levels from A-N (Fontas and Pinnell) as well as a selection of books separated by interests and authors. These books were picture books as well as beginning chapter books. The books were fiction as well as informational texts. The classroom library is organized by genre/authors/themes and titles as well as by levels as seen in photos 1 and 2. An Excel spread sheet was also used to chart the students’ stamina.



Picture #1



Picture #2



Picture #3

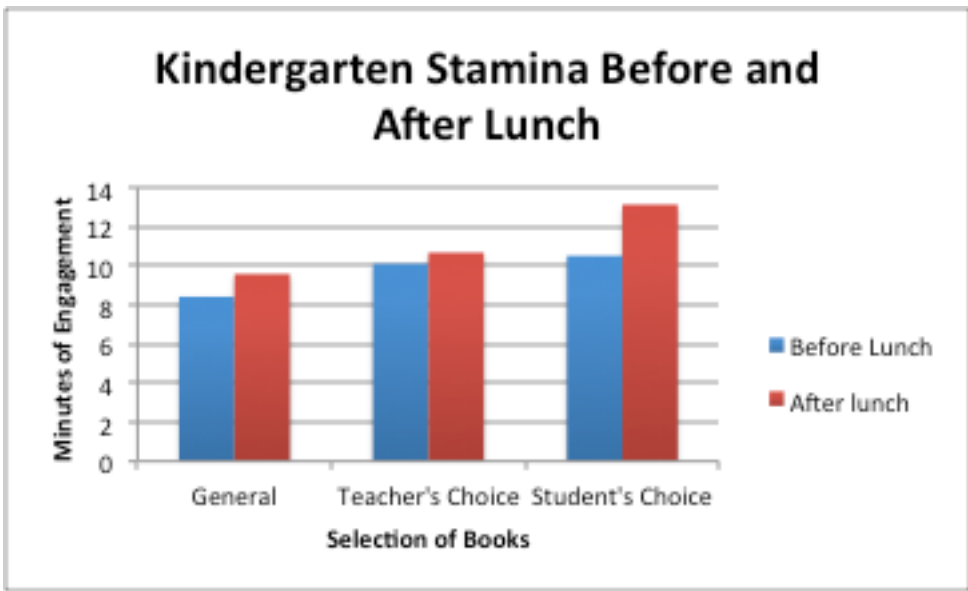
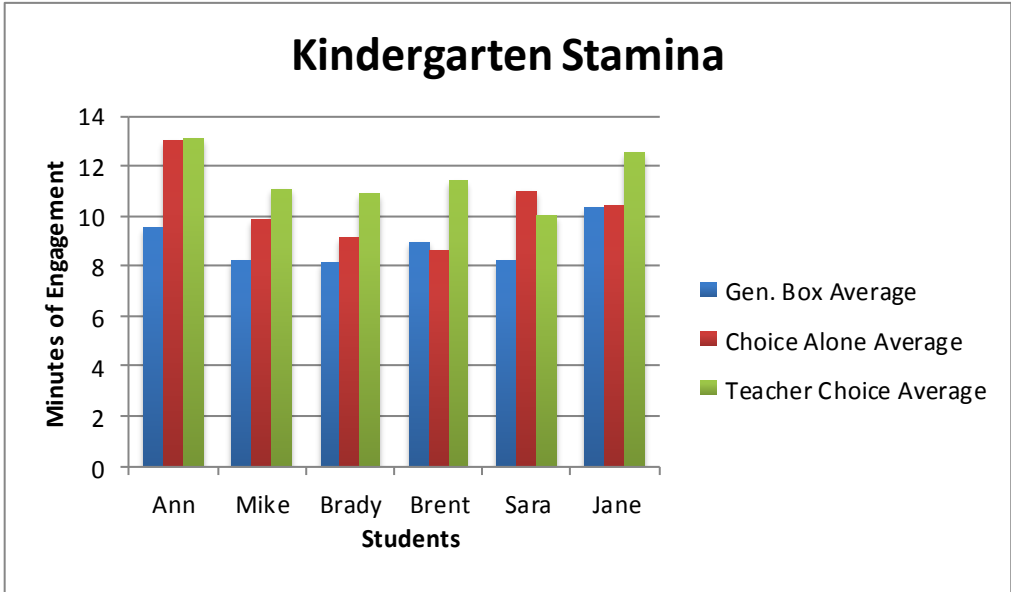
***Procedure:***

The classroom teacher did an initial timing of the whole class' Read-to-Self stamina. Six students from the kindergarten class and ten students from the third grade class were randomly chosen to participate in the study. The classroom teacher chose a variety of grade level books for each book box. The classroom teachers then charted the students' stamina for a week during Read-to-Self. At the conclusion of that week, the classroom teacher allowed the students to choose six books from the classroom library to put in their book boxes. The teacher then charted the students' stamina for another week. At the conclusion of the second week, the classroom teacher chose six new books for all of the students at their individual reading level to replace the student-chosen books, taking into account the interest of the students. The teacher then charted the students' stamina for a third week. During each of the three weeks, the students participated in Read-to-Self before lunch three days a week and participated in Read-to-Self after lunch two days a week.

***Findings:***

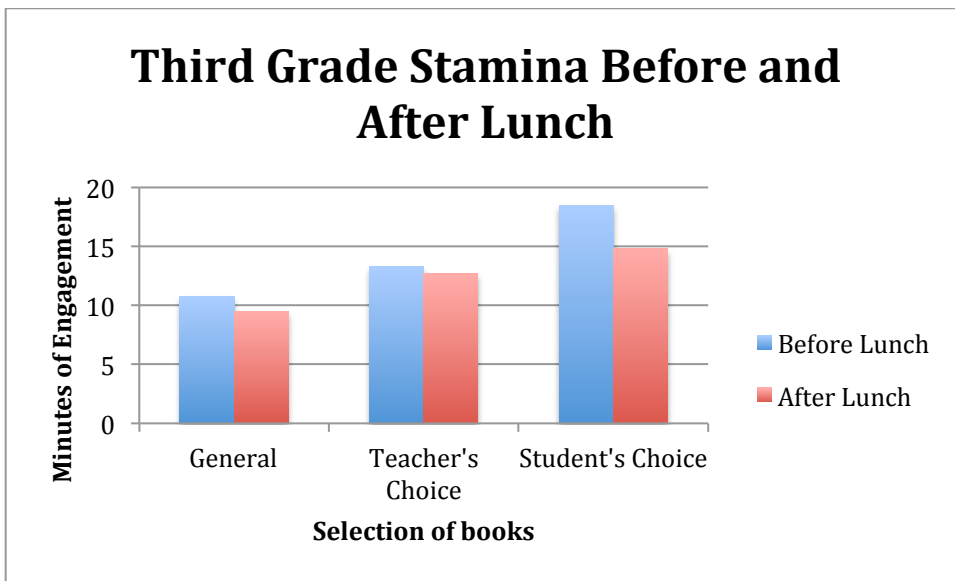
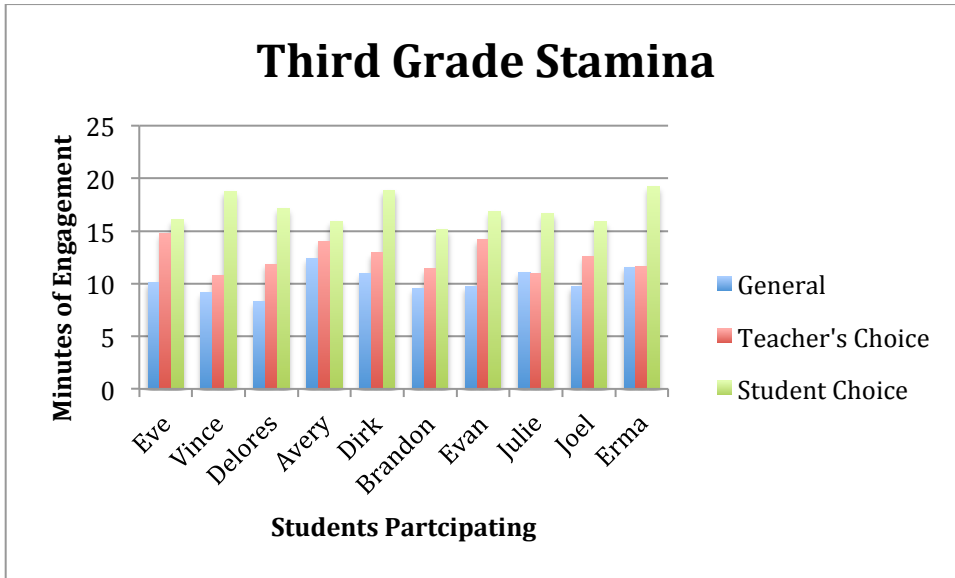
***Interpretations/Discussions:***

**Kindergarten:** The study showed a slight increase in Read-to-Self stamina when the teacher chose the books for the kindergarten students' book boxes. Each student had an increase except for Sara, as shown in figure 1; Kindergarten Stamina. The study also showed that students had more stamina when they did Read-to-Self after lunch instead of before lunch, as shown in figure 2: Kindergarten Stamina Before and After Lunch.



**Third Grade:** The third grade data showed a significant increase in engagement of Read-To-Self when the students were able to choose their own books, as shown in figure 3: Third Grade Stamina. The students increased their stamina by more than

five minutes. It also showed slightly better stamina when the third graders participated in “Read-To-Self” time in the morning, as shown in figure 4.



**Analysis:**

As the kindergarten students were choosing their own books for their book boxes, it was noted that students often chose books that the teacher had read to

them, books such as Junie B. Jones and Magic Tree House books. These simple chapter books have very few pictures and difficult text for these students who are currently reading at a level C. As a result, these books did not hold the students' attention as well as books that were on the students' level. When the teacher made the book choices, she chose "just right" books for these students to read. They were level C books that the students should be able to read independently. The researcher concludes that the students had more stamina with teacher-chosen books because they could read them more successfully. The study showed that the kindergarteners were all more engaged when they participated in Read-to-Self after lunch. Both time periods occurred after a recess however, and the students were accustomed to a quiet activity following lunch. They normally participated in literacy learning centers before lunch.

Things were a bit different with the third grade students. The study shows that the students had better stamina when they had free choice of what books they were reading during Read-To-Self (see figure 3). As much as a teacher tries to get to know the reading interests of her students, she may not always be able to recommend books that will appeal to all students. The students asked several times to be able to choose different books during the week of the teacher-chosen books and never once asked when they could choose new books during the week with the books that they chose themselves. The study also showed that the third grade students had better stamina when they read in the morning instead of the afternoon.

Although the results of this study were not always consistent, there are several reasons as to why that might be. The kindergarten students are very young and are just learning to read. They look up to the adults in their lives who read fluently. When most kindergarteners come to school the first thing they want to learn is how to read. So they think it is “cool” to “read” chapter books even though they are not able to read text. The third grade students are capable of reading and know what reading means and are better able to follow a plan for choosing “Just Right” books. For many kindergarten children any book they pick up would be too difficult, and it would be frustrating for them to try the 5-finger rule. So they are more attentive to the reading task when given a box of books to choose from where they can find books that interest them that are also at their level. While observing the students during book selection time it was very clear that more of the third graders were using the 5-finger rule than the kindergarten students.

There was also a difference in what time of day worked best for the students. The kindergarten students had better stamina after lunch and the third grade students had better stamina before lunch. The kindergarten classroom was located in the middle of the hall that housed all kindergarten classrooms. All of the classrooms were on the same schedule for lunch and recesses. The noise in the hallway did not seem to be a problem. The third grade classroom was located on the corner of the hall where the two restrooms and the cafeteria intersect and the recess doors were located. During the afternoon the hallway gets very loud. This may have been a distraction from their reading. In the afternoon the third grade students were usually tired from a morning of concentration on reading and math.

## ***Implications and Conclusions:***

### **Conclusion:**

The kindergarten students did build stamina while practicing Read-to-Self. Students were all engaged in Read-to-Self for an average of 10 minutes by the end of the study. Data collected from this study show that the teacher's guidance while choosing books in kindergarten is a benefit for stamina building. The study also indicates that the kindergarten students were more engaged when they participated in Read-to-Self after lunch. Before lunch these students seemed to have more energy and had a harder time staying on task.

The third graders also built stamina throughout the study. At the beginning of the study the collective stamina was just over ten minutes and by the end of the study it was seventeen minutes. The stamina jumped by almost five minutes as a group between the teacher-chosen texts and the self selected texts. The before lunch stamina for the third graders was about fourteen minutes. The after lunch stamina was about twelve minutes. The quieter hallways before lunch and the students being fresher in the mornings might have influenced these results.

### **Applications:**

A variety of factors come together to enable teachers to provide optimum independent reading experiences for children. It is helpful to know just how to prepare book boxes for all students. Student choice is important; however, readability is also a very important aspect to be considered. Finding a time when students are able to focus and achieve Read-to-Self stamina is important for both

students and teachers. This Read-to-Self time is a time when the teacher can meet with small groups of students and work on necessary skills without interruptions from other students. For kindergarten students in this school, doing Read-To-Self in the afternoon and the teacher choosing the books or at the least directing students' choices resulted in more stamina. For the third grade students, allowing the students freedom to choose "Just Right" books and doing Read-to-Self in the morning resulted in better stamina.

The results for these two groups are not consistent because the age of the students and the level at which the students are reading played a large role in this study. Kindergarten children have a more limited attention span and are just learning how to read, whereas third grade students have been engaged in reading instruction for three years and have developed much longer attention spans.

**Limitations:**

The greatest limitations to this study were time, student absenteeism and library size. The school where this study was completed just adopted a new basal series this year so finding time to pull away from the basal structure and actually time the students' Read-To-Self time was challenging. Also, the fact that the third grade students had more stamina made it difficult to fit the read-to-self session into a small block of time. At times the students were reading over 20 minutes. This interrupted the regular classroom schedule.

It was also difficult at times, especially with the kindergarten students, to measure students' reading stamina because they were absent so often. One student was absent for 3 days in one week, so the collection of data had to be delayed by a

week. It was also more difficult than expected to find enough books on the students' independent level to be able to fill the appropriate book boxes with a sufficient number of books. Students in kindergarten need very simple text and many children's books are at a much high level. These students need books that practice the reading of sight words and easily decodable words.

The final limitation of this study was that the school where this study was conducted was set on fire last spring. The classroom library had to be rebuilt. Books had to be organized and leveled throughout the summer

### **Reflections:**

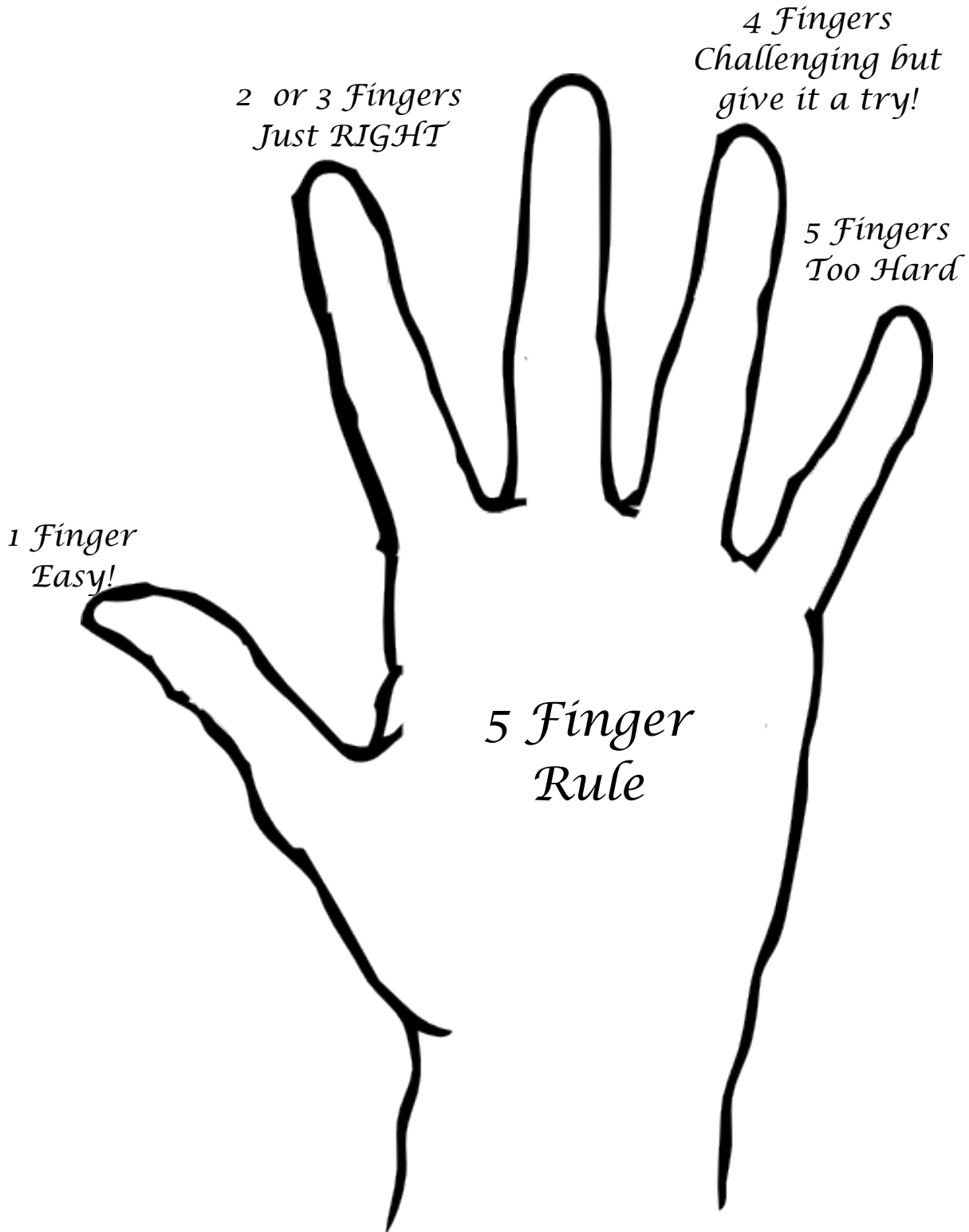
Upon completion of this study, it has come to my attention just how important it is to teach students an easy way to choose a book that is appropriate for their own reading level. As I continue to teach in the coming years, I will always teach my students how to find "Just Right" books and allow them time to browse the classroom library. I have also incorporated book talks in to my classroom. When a new book comes in with my monthly book order, I put it in a bag hanging in the classroom library. The students are allowed to choose the new books for their book boxes. The first student to read a new book from the library does a book talk during our morning meeting. This helps introduce other classmates to the new books that we have received.

Each month I choose a new book to read to my students as a read aloud. After completing the research for this study I devised a plan where I choose a different genre to read from each month. I find that this is a great way to introduce students to new genres. Focusing on stamina and students' book choices helped me

to appreciate the importance of book sharing with peers. I have found that this increases the students' interest in new genres as well as authors.

Appendix 1

*Just Right Books*  
*IS this a good book for me?*



## Appendix 2

**B**

### **Book Length:**

- Is this a good length
- Is it too little, just right or too much?
- Do I feel like committing to this book?

**O**

### **Ordinary language:**

- Turn to any page and read aloud.
- Does it sound natural?
- Does it flow? Does it make sense?

**O**

### **Organization:**

- How is the book structured?
- Am I comfortable with the print size and number of words on a page?
- Are chapters short or long?

**K**

### **Knowledge prior to book**

- Read the title, view the cover page or read the summary on the back of the book.
- What do I already know about this topic, author or illustrator?

**M**

### **Manageable Text**

- Begin reading the book.
- Are the words in the book easy, just right, or hard?
- Do I understand what I read?

**A**

### **Appeal to genre**

- What is the genre?
- Have I read this genre before?
- Do I like or expect to like this genre?

**T**

### **Topic Appropriateness**

- Am I comfortable with the topic of this book?
- Do I feel like I am ready to read about this topic?

**C**

### **Connection**

- Can I relate to this book?
- Does this book remind me of anything or anyone?

**H**

### **High Interest**

- Am I interested in the topic of this book?
- Am I interested in the author/illustrator?
- Do others recommend this book?

Wutz & Wedwick, 2005 p. 17)

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