



Sparking Reading Motivation with the Bluestem: School Librarians' Role with a Children's Choice Award

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Abstract

This paper reports findings of a qualitative collective case study and single case study that explored student reading motivation. This research focused on school librarians' perceived value of one children's choice award—the Bluestem Award—and its effect on school librarians' promotions and student behavior in the school library. Data were collected from site visits, questionnaires, book availability, book circulation, and voting ballots. Findings suggested that school librarians' perceived value of the Bluestem was essential for their promotion of the award. This study concluded that the purchase of multiple copies of Bluestem Award books and promotions with the greatest personal interaction led to greater student reading motivation, as evidenced by student questionnaires, checkouts, and voting behavior.

Introduction

Students typically lose interest in leisure reading—also known as independent reading, recreational reading, and free voluntary reading (Peterson et al. 2014)—beginning in third grade (Guthrie, Alverson, and Poundstone 1999). Both researchers (Baker, Dreher, and Guthrie 2000; Guthrie et al. 2006a) and practitioners (Marinak and Gambrell 2008) have identified reading motivation as key to reaching reading achievement. Reading motivation research focusing on teachers and the classroom domain is well documented (Gambrell 1996; Wigfield and Guthrie 1997; Guthrie et al. 2006a; Lapp and Fisher 2009; Daniels and Steres 2011; Gambrell 2011; De Naeghel et al. 2012; Ivey and Johnston 2013). Apart from a few exceptions (Everhart, Angelos, and McGriff 2002), this research has not extended beyond the classroom into the school library. Administrators (Lance, Schwarz, and Rodney 2014) and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL 2010) have identified school librarians as being in a critical position to assist students in their reading lives. Thus, the research reported here focuses on the school library realm, specifically examining how twenty-one school librarians promoted a children's choice

award and its effect on students' checking out books nominated for the award and their voting behavior. This paper is intended for practicing school librarians who are interested in boosting students' leisure reading by means of children's choice awards, as well as for library educators who are training pre-service school librarians. Children's choice awards are promoted at the state level throughout the United States and at the global level through the International Literacy Association; therefore, the findings may be of interest to librarians and teachers in many countries.

Student reading motivation is of central importance. Reading introduces new concepts, pushes the reader further in familiar topics, and opens doors to others' thoughts, customs, understandings, and points of view. Children around the world with reading apathy (Mullis et al. 2012) miss out on these benefits and "lose out on as much as individuals who are illiterate" (Cullinan 2000, 1). Barbara A. Marinak and Linda B. Gambrell asserted that "motivation is central to reading development, and if students are not motivated to read, they will never reach their full literacy potential" (2016, 22). Sparking interest in books through inviting and encouraging students to read is a critical responsibility of school librarians (Apeji 2002; Moreillon 2009; Bang-Jensen 2010; Lance, Schwarz, and Rodney 2014). To maximize student benefits, reading motivation must expand into the school library domain. Giving students book choices is an essential way for school librarians to engage and motivate students to read (Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell 1994; Daniels and Steres 2011). Children's choice awards, such as Illinois's Bluestem Award, allow students to choose to read a minimum number of books from a longer list and vote for their favorite in a student election. In this study, I review previous classroom-based research on motivational aspects, focusing on how choice, access, and social interaction may influence reading motivation in the school library setting. This study uses Jacquelynn A. Malloy, Barbara A. Marinak, and Linda B. Gambrell's definition of motivation as how often people choose one activity over another, and their persistence and effort used in that activity (2010). Extrinsic motivation refers to an instance when an individual participates in an activity because of a belief that it will lead to a separable outcome (an outcome unrelated to the reading activity itself), whereas intrinsic motivation refers to an instance when an individual engages in an activity because it is interesting or fun (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to develop a greater understanding of school librarians' perceived value of the Bluestem Award, how it influences their promotion of the award, and students' responses to these promotions. The study revolved around three central research questions:

- How does school librarians' perceived value of the Bluestem Award affect their promotional efforts?
- Which promotions do school librarians within this district use to promote the Bluestem Award?
- How does school librarians' promotion of the Bluestem Award impact students' motivation to check out books on the nominee list?

To answer these questions, this qualitative study with some quantitative components included a collective case study with student and school librarian participants from twenty-one schools. In order to focus on students' rationale for checking out Bluestem books, a single case study was conducted at one of the twenty-one schools. Finally, the relationship between school librarians'

perceived value of the Bluestem Award, their efforts to promote the program, and student behavior are discussed.

Literature Review

Introduction

Literature provided insight into the history of children's choice awards, reading motivation in the context of the school library, the need for a study on a children's choice award, and two theories used to frame this study.

History of Children's Choice Awards

Although the Newbery, Caldecott, Sibert, and Pura Belpré awards are bestowed for literature specifically geared for children, students have no input about which books receive these awards. Only adults can serve on the American Library Association (ALA) award committees and make decisions about which books receive the awards (ALSC 2018). In 1940 Harry Hartman, a Seattle bookseller, included children in selecting winning books by creating an award that encouraged youth to cast a ballot for their favorite book (PNLA 2015). Since that trailblazing award, creation of state-level children's choice awards surged between 1970 and 2000 (Hilbun and Claes 2010). Pat Miller stated that forty-nine states in the U.S. established children's choice awards, with the exception of Mississippi (2011). However, the University of Southern Mississippi's website identifies the Magnolia Award as its children's choice award, first given in 2010. Therefore, all fifty states have children's choice awards (U. of Southern Miss. 2017).

In 1988 the first children's choice award in Illinois, called the Rebecca Caudill Award, gave students in fourth through eighth grades the opportunity to vote for their favorite book. Beginning in 2005, younger Illinois students in kindergarten through third grade had an opportunity to choose their favorite book through the Monarch Award process. Despite the existence of these two awards, the Association of Illinois School Library Educators (AISLE), formerly known as the Illinois School Library Media Association (ISLMA), launched the state's newest children's choice award. The Bluestem Award was established during the 2010–2011 school year for students in third, fourth, and fifth grades. This award was aimed at students who craved longer texts than those on the Monarch list but were not yet ready for the sophistication of some of the books on the Caudill list.

Reading Motivation in the Context of the School Library

Introduction

Context can refer to many arenas of reading motivation in the school library, but this paper focuses on choice, access, and social interactions.

Choice

Although adults can make educational choices on a daily, hourly, and even minute-to-minute basis, the same is not true for children. In a yearlong study of how the classroom environment affects reading motivation, Barbara M. Palmer, Rose Marie Codling, and Linda B. Gambrell

recorded responses from 330 third-grade and fifth-grade students. Responses indicated that students were motivated when given opportunities to read books they chose themselves (1994). Through a case study focusing on a middle school's reading culture, Erika Daniels and Michael Steres found that choice and context were significant factors for students' reading engagement (2011).

Access

Access to texts impacts student reading motivation. Bernice E. Cullinan asserted that a variety of appealing materials is key to promoting independent reading (2000). Examining results from eight studies, Stephen D. Krashen noted that the majority of students indicated that they access a significant percentage of books from a school, classroom, or public library (2004). Likewise, results from a study conducted by Kathryn M. Edmunds and Kathryn L. Bauserman on pre-K through fifth-grade students indicated that the school library was the place students learned about and accessed most books (2006). These findings clearly suggest that libraries serve as an essential place for students to find and access books. However, study results differ about the type of library that was most influential. Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell found that third-grade and fifth-grade students claimed that it was the classroom collection, rather than the school library, that motivated them to read (1994). (It was unclear whether or not the school in Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell's study had a fully functioning school library and a certified librarian.) These studies suggest that access to books, whether from a school, classroom, or public library, is important for students so that they can check out and read materials that may strengthen students' motivation to read more books.

Social Interactions

Although access is important, researchers suggested that social interactions are key to reading (Gambrell, Codling, and Palmer 1996; Lapp and Fisher 2009; Ivey and Johnston 2013). Gay Ivey and Peter H. Johnston researched how providing access to multiple copies of high-interest books along with time to read and engage in peer conversations affected students ages thirteen through seventeen (2013). The students in Ivey and Johnston's 2013 study coached each other through books and continued to discuss the text beyond the last page. Results indicated that this combination of a text-rich environment and time for book conversations increased the students' reading both in and out of school. Likewise, Diane Lapp and Douglas Fisher examined twenty-four high school juniors who chose a variety of books around a common theme, fostering a book club atmosphere with lively student-led discussions (2009).

Researchers have found that social interactions are also imperative for younger age groups. Gambrell, Codling, and Palmer used the Motivation to Read Profile (MRP) to provide insight into the differences among individual readers and to explore dimensions of third-grade and fifth-grade students' motivation to read. Results indicated that most of the students heard about books from friends, teachers, and parents, and students talked to family and friends about books (Gambrell, Codling, and Palmer 1996). Moreover, Valerie Bang-Jensen informally interviewed twelve upper-elementary students about the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award (Vermont's children's choice award) and concluded that students exchanged friend recommendations from the award book list. One girl sought out peer book suggestions because "it gets fun to read stories and be able to go back and talk about exactly what happened. I think that's fun" (Bang-Jensen 2010, 172). Indeed, reading is not a solo act; it is social (Ivey 2014).

Need for Study on a Children's Choice Award

Children's choice awards have a foothold in both the adult-controlled world of children's literature and student selection. In the case of Illinois's Bluestem Award, more than fifty educators make a three-year commitment to develop the yearly book list (Bromann and Pulgar 2016). Students can nominate books to be considered for future lists, but a school librarian or teacher must officially submit the suggestions. In addition, only students in third through fifth grades can cast votes for one of the twenty books nominated each year (AISLE 2018).

A limited number of studies focus on children's choice book awards (Seagrave 2004; Bang-Jensen 2010; Hilbun and Claes 2010). Janis R. Seagrave examined previous research on children's choice awards, studied twenty awards, and focused in detail on five. When describing other studies, Seagrave noted the lack of a thorough impact assessment and detail, calling them "informal and subjective" (2004). Junko Yokota's examination of children's book award research echoed Seagrave's assessment; Yokota referred to previous research as "informed perspectives" without systematic research methods and data analysis. Yokota called for future case studies on book awards that use qualitative methodologies and triangulate data (2011).

Three research gaps have emerged in the review of literature. First, previous research pertaining to reading motivation concentrated on teachers' efforts without considering the role of school librarians (Gambrell 1996, 2011; Boraks, Hoffman, and Bauer 1997). Second, many studies on children's choice awards were subjective and lacked thorough impact assessments (Seagrave 2004; Yokota 2011). Third, no research articles have been published on school librarians' perceived value of a children's choice award and how school librarians' promotional efforts affect student reading motivation. Thus, a clear need for an in-depth study on school librarians' role with a children's choice award was recognized.

Theoretical Lens

Introduction

To frame this current study, two theoretical perspectives were used: Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan's Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) (1985) and Suzanne Hidi and K. Ann Renninger's Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (2006).

Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)

CET (1985), a subtheory of Self-Determination Theory, specifically examines dimensions of both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) theorized in CET that people have natural psychological needs for competence and self-determination that undergird intrinsic motivation.

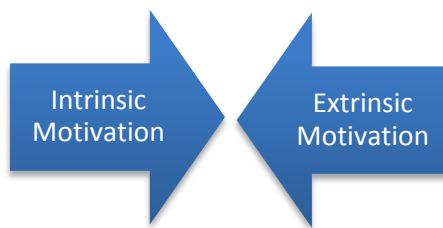


Figure 1. Representation of Deci and Ryan's (1985) CET interpretation of motivational conflict.

CET (see figure 1) posits intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation as being at odds (Deci and Ryan 1985). Moreover, Edward L. Deci, Richard Koestner, and Richard M. Ryan suggested that extrinsic motivators, such as tangible rewards, can be detrimental to intrinsic motivation (2001). Despite these findings, tangible extrinsic rewards “have long been part of the currency of schools” (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 2001, 1). Some educators, such as school librarians, incentivize reading with prizes and trinkets. Jessie De Naeghel et al. (2012) deemed Deci and Ryan's (1985) conclusion as premature and concluded that the more important motivational distinction is between autonomous motivation and controlled motivation with autonomous reasons for reading as the optimal type (see figure 2).

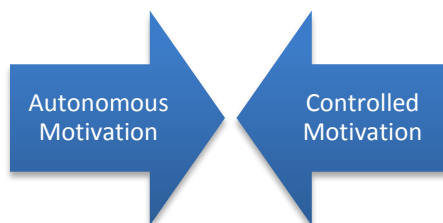


Figure 2. Representation of De Naeghel et al. (2012) interpretation of motivational conflict.

CET posits that *unexpected* concrete rewards (such as money, prizes, or awards) do not detrimentally affect intrinsic motivation. However, CET suggests that external rewards, such as prizes, may diminish a person's view of his or her competence and self-determination, which in turn may lower a person's intrinsic motivation. This theory is multifaceted, and, therefore, it is inappropriate “to think of children as motivated or unmotivated, but rather as motivated in a variety of ways” (Wigfield 2000, 142). Using CET as a guiding theory, school librarians can promote reading as its own reward rather than as means to earn an expected prize.

Four-Phase Model of Interest Development

In addition to intrinsic motivation, interest plays a vital role in reading motivation. Hidi and Renninger's Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (2006) extends beyond recording whether or not an interest is present by theorizing how an interest develops over time. These researchers suggested that a fragile situational interest can become a more enduring individual interest (see figure 3). Without outside support, an interest can become dormant at any phase. Although each stage is important in developing an interest, the study reported in this paper primarily focused on *triggered situational interest* because this is the phase in which school librarians aim to spark student interest in checking out Bluestem books.



Figure 3. Representation of Hidi and Renninger's Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (2006).

Methodology

Participants

Participants were drawn from a large school district in a suburban area about thirty-five miles from a major midwestern metropolitan city. All twenty-one elementary school librarians within the district were invited and chose to participate in the study. The study also included the 6,043 students in third through fifth grades from those twenty-one schools. I served as one of the school librarian participants.

Research Approach and Analysis

A qualitative approach, with some quantitative components, was selected for this study. A collective case study enabled me to focus on the school librarians' perceived value of the Bluestem Award, their promotional efforts, and how often students at the participating schools checked out books nominated for the Bluestem and voted for the award. A single case study at a single school provided a deeper understanding of students' rationale for checking out books nominated for the Bluestem Award.

Data Sources

Multiple data points were used within the study and are depicted in a funnel-shaped model in figure 4. The large opening of the funnel represents the collective case study, which included site visits, school librarian questionnaires, book availability, book circulation statistics, and voting rates. The narrow opening represents the single case study, which included those same methods plus an investigation of students' rationale for checking out Bluestem books as indicated on student questionnaires.

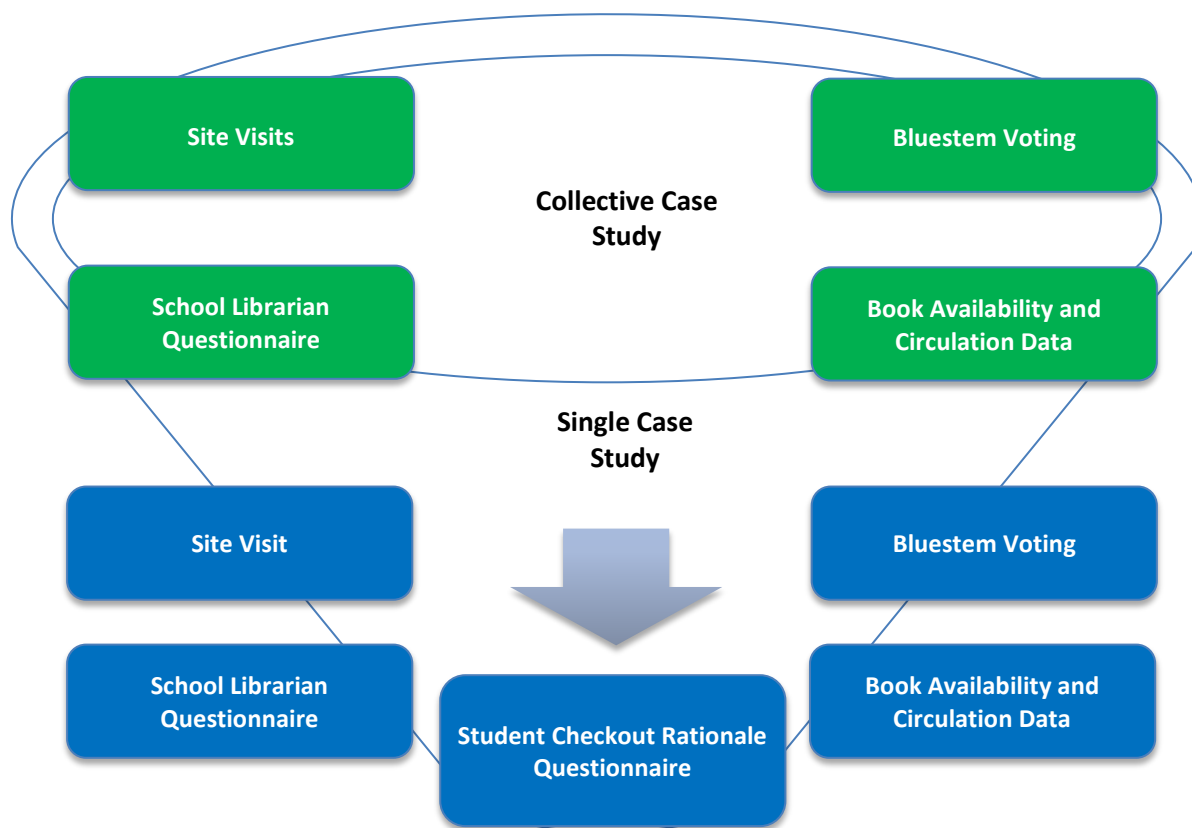


Figure 4. Model depicting the type of data collected for the collective case study and single case study.

Obtaining Consent

Appropriate procedures for obtaining consent were followed. Since human subjects were used for this study, approvals from the case study school principal and the assistant superintendent for the district’s elementary schools were required to allow site visits and other components of the study. After approval had been obtained, consent was also received from my university’s institutional review board. Next, permission was sought from and granted by all participating school librarians before proceeding with data collection at site visits. School librarian participation was optional, and consent forms were given to school librarians who chose to be a part of the study. This consent form detailed a data collection plan and assured the anonymity and confidentiality of the participating librarians. Throughout the process, school librarians could choose to withdraw from the study. They were assured that if they opted out of the study, there would be no negative consequences. In this study, no child was identified personally, avoiding the need for consent from parents or assent from students.

Data Collection

For the collective case study, I surveyed the school librarians through an online questionnaire (see Appendix A). After receiving permission to visit the twenty-one participating schools, I conducted site visits to document and photograph each Bluestem display. I implemented site visit guidelines (see Appendix B) when visiting each school library. The school along with the

librarian were assigned a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. To assure that my proximity at my own school library within the district did not influence my findings, a retired school librarian reviewed my field notes and photographs. To track book availability and book circulations from each school library, I used the automated online circulation system. Later, I collected Bluestem voting information from participating schools either via an online Google ballot form or directly from school librarians.

The single case study incorporated the same methods as the collective case study with the addition of students' completing questionnaires about their reasons for checking out Bluestem nominees (see Appendix C). These voluntary questionnaires, made available to students who checked out Bluestem-nominated books at the single case study school, provided insight into why students chose to check out these books. Each individual Bluestem book had a note attached to its back cover, reminding students to complete a questionnaire before leaving the school library. This questionnaire—intended to be completed in less than one minute—was available in both an online version and print form. The print version and return box were in the Bluestem display, while online forms were accessible from any computer in the school library. I removed completed print questionnaires from the return box and recorded findings daily Monday through Friday between October 21, 2016, through February 23, 2017, on days that school was in session. These multiple sources of evidence provided descriptive-rich data to analyze for themes and patterns.

Findings

Introduction

Findings from this study are organized below by research question. Although varied in the strength of agreement, most of the school librarians indicated a high perceived value of the Bluestem Award on the questionnaires.

School Librarians' Perception of Student Bluestem Book Checkout

School librarians were asked to complete the following statement on the questionnaires (see Appendix A) in November 2016: "At my school, Bluestem books are checked out _____." Results are shown in table 1.

Table 1. School librarians' perception of student Bluestem book checkout.

Response	Percentage of School Librarians
Slightly more than other books	42.9%
Much more than other books	38.1%
About the same as other books	19.0%
Less than other books	0%
Much less than other books	0%

Note. $N = 21$

School Librarians' Perception of Student Motivation to Read Bluestem Books

School librarians were also asked to complete the statement (see Appendix A): “The students seem _____ motivated to read the Bluestem books.” Results are shown in table 2.

Table 2. School librarians' perception of the level of students' motivation to read Bluestem books.

Response	Percentage of School Librarians
Very	52.4%
Somewhat	42.9%
Not so	4.7%
Not at all	0%

Note. $N = 21$

School Librarians' Reading of Bluestem Books Outside of the Work Day

In November 2016 school librarians self-identified the number of Bluestems books they read. All the librarians took time outside of the work day to read nominee titles—books on the 2017 Bluestem book list. Reading some or all twenty Bluestem books may have been an indicator of the school librarians' perceived value of the award. It is possible that some librarians may have read more 2017 Bluestem books in subsequent months, but those additional books were not included in the results of this study. Of the twenty-one school librarian participants, four librarians read six books or fewer, seven read between eight and ten books, four read between thirteen and sixteen books, and six read all twenty of the books. The high level of Bluestem reading outside of the work day may suggest that most school librarians within this district had a high perceived value of the Bluestem Award.

School Librarians' Rationale for Participating in the Bluestem Award

Another question inquired: “Why do you choose to participate in the Bluestem Award at your school library?” Although school librarians' responses varied, most of their comments indicated a high perceived value of the Bluestem Award either because it created an opportunity to introduce a quality set of books or because it excited students about reading. The following quote, produced verbatim, represented reasons that nineteen of the school librarians gave for participating in the Bluestem: “Provides a varied and high quality reading list for students that participate. Gives me another opportunity to book talk and highlight books with students” (Gutman librarian November 6, 2016). While this comment represented nineteen of the responses, two school librarians indicated a fondness for the award because of its tradition at their schools. Although these two school librarians did not specifically speak of value or worth of the award, they did refer to participating in Bluestem as a school tradition.

Results from the questionnaires indicated that the school librarians:

- a) identified Bluestem books as being checked out more often than other books,

- b) perceived students to be “somewhat” to “very” motivated to read Bluestem books,
- c) read on average of twelve Bluestem books outside the work day, and
- d) shared a positive rationale for participating in the Bluestem Award.

These findings clearly indicate that almost all the participating school librarians within the district had a favorable perceived value of the Bluestem Award.

School Librarians’ Promotions

Nineteen school librarians who indicated a high perceived value of the Bluestem Award purchased and made Bluestem books available, created a special section, marked individual Bluestem books, and/or promoted the award in additional ways.

Making Bluestem Books Available to Students in School Library Collections

School librarians’ first Bluestem promotional practice was making 2017 nominee titles available to students in school library book collections. Perhaps acquiring books could be regarded as demonstrating school librarians’ perceived value of the Bluestem. However, for purposes of this study, I considered book acquisition only as a type of promotion. All the schools had a library book budget, but individual book budget amounts differed. Each school librarian determined which books to purchase for her school’s collection and decided whether or not to use book funds to buy Bluestems. Not all the books on the 2017 Bluestem list were newly published, so some schools already may have owned older titles, such as *Tuck Everlasting* (Babbitt 1975). Prioritizing funding for purchase of the books from either the library budget or a grant served to promote the Bluestem Award.

After the ordered books arrived at the school, the school librarian or library aide took multiple steps to process each Bluestem book before adding it to the shelf. Most of the school librarians or aides completed each step in this time-intensive and time-sensitive process. However, in one counterexample, the Bluestem books at one school stalled midway through this process and were not added to the library shelves. For this study, those unprocessed Bluestems were not counted as part of that school’s total because the books were not available for student checkout.

To determine Bluestem book availability per student, each school’s total quantity of the titles nominated for the 2017 Bluestem Award was divided by the school’s number of students in grades three through five (the age group eligible to vote for the award). All the elementary schools across the district owned some Bluestem books. The minimum number of Bluestem books available per eligible student was 0.03, the maximum was 0.42, and the median was 0.18.

Special Section for Bluestems

Simply making Bluestem books available in the school library was not sufficient. Without additional promotions, books may have remained on the shelves. Bluestem display areas were one way to pique students’ interest. Site visits during November 2016 revealed that twenty of the twenty-one participating school librarians created a Bluestem section. All displays were inside the school libraries, although the locations within the library varied. Each display was unique. Some were on top of shelves or in wooden holders, while other Bluestem books were on metal shelving units against a wall. Eighteen of the schools had a sign identifying the section as Bluestem; two had displays without signage, while one school did not have a Bluestem section.

Marking Individual Bluestem Books

Nineteen of the schools labeled individual books to distinguish them as Bluestem nominees. Site visits revealed that most schools attached a sticker on the book spine with an image of the Bluestem logo and the year 2017, while other schools used translucent blue label covers over the spine label that indicated shelving location when not on display. A few schools proved exceptions to this marking trend. One school mistakenly marked the 2017 books with the Bluestem logo and the year 2016. Other schools distinguished books with a different color spine label or did not mark the books at all.

Additional Promotions

Bluestem bookmarks or lists were made available on eight of the displays. These materials had been available as free downloads from the AISLE website, but not all the schools used these official versions. Eight schools displayed a large poster featuring Bluestem book covers, while other schools included additional display features.

School Librarians' Impact on Students' Motivation to Check Out

Introduction

The similar sets of questions asked of school librarians (see Appendix A) and students (see Appendix C) furthered my understanding of librarians' promotions and students' reasons for checkout. The school librarians were asked: "Which promotions did you use with the Bluestem Award this school year? (Check all that apply)" while students were asked: "Why do you want to check this book out? (Check as many as apply)." The lists of possible responses in the two questionnaires were nearly identical (except for wording differences), but the student version included an additional response, "author of the book" (see Appendix C). While school librarians responded to this questionnaire only once, students at the single case study school Singer Elementary were encouraged to complete a questionnaire every time they checked out a Bluestem book. The final number of questionnaires did not indicate the number of participating students but rather the number of completed questionnaires. The following subsections compare students' reasons for checking out Bluestems to both the Singer librarian's promotions and to the district school librarians' promotions.

Students' Rationale for Checking Out Bluestem Books

Between August 2016 and March 2017 students at the single case study school Singer Elementary were asked on questionnaires why they checked out Bluestem books. Results from these surveys are included in table 3. The three most popular student responses—checking out to be eligible to vote for the award, watching book trailers (videos advertising the books) with the school librarian, and booktalks—all indicate a high degree of personal interaction with the school librarian. In contrast, creating a Bluestem section, displaying posters, or making multiple copies of the books available did not include such interactions. In table 3 students' reasons for checking out Bluestem books are shown in descending order with percentages representing the number of completed responses.

Single Case Study School Librarian’s Promotion of Bluestem Nominees

As school librarian at Singer Elementary, researcher for this study, and author of this paper, I participated in all the measured Bluestem practices noted on the student questionnaire (see Appendix C). As Singer’s school librarian, I also made school-wide Bluestem Award announcements in the morning and to grade levels in the lunchroom, distributed Bluestem posters to classroom teachers and displayed posters in the school library, and purchased multiple copies of all twenty of the 2017 Bluestem nominee titles.

Other Participating School Librarians’ Promotion of Bluestem Nominees

All twenty-one elementary school librarians completed a Bluestem questionnaire for this study. See table 3 for school librarians’ self-identified practices in descending order.

School Librarians’ Promotional Practices Compared to Students’ Reasons for Reading

Student respondents at Singer, the single-case school where students completed a questionnaire when borrowing a Bluestem-nominated book, ranked eligibility for voting as their top reason for borrowing Bluestem books (43.9 percent), and nineteen of twenty-one school librarians (85.7 percent) reported that they held a vote. However, in general, school librarians did not support Singer students’ second priority, book trailers (40.4 percent), as strongly; only fourteen of twenty-one school librarians (66.7 percent) used this promotion at their own schools. Although the most popular school librarian response—reported by twenty of twenty-one (95.2 percent)—was creating a special section for the Bluestem books, results from Singer student questionnaires ranked a special section as the third most important promotion, appearing on 20.3 percent of the student questionnaires. These findings indicate that not all the school librarians used promotions that the students ranked as the most motivating.

Table 3. Students’ reasons for book checkouts in comparison to school librarian promotions.

Responses	Singer Students’ Reasons for Book Checkouts *	District School Librarians’ Bluestem Promotions **
Bluestem vote later this year	43.9%	85.7%
Book trailers for the Bluestem books	40.4%	66.7%
Special section for the books	20.3%	95.2%
Other	15.3%	14.3%
Announcements about the Bluestem books	14.2%	23.8%
Bluestem poster	12.2%	47.6%
Purchase/make available multiple copies of the book	8.7%	90.5%
Author of the book (included only on the student questionnaire)	8.7%	N/A

*Responses were from participating students from the single case study school (Singer Elementary) rather than from all twenty-one participating schools across the district. Students at Singer were invited to complete a questionnaire every time they checked out a book nominated for the 2017 Bluestem Award, so the responses represented percentages of the responses at Singer, not the total student population.

**These results were self-reported promotions from twenty-one school librarians.

Student Behavior

In this study, one measurable school librarian promotional effort was making Bluestem books available. Checkouts and voting represented student behavior. To enable equal comparison across schools Bluestem book availability, checkouts, and voting were divided by the number of third-grade through fifth-grade students per school (see table 4). Schools with higher Bluestem book availability had higher rates of student checkouts, and schools with lower Bluestem book availability had lower student checkout rates.

Table 4. Bluestem book availability, checkouts, and voting per school.

School Pseudonym	Checkouts/ Student in grades 3–5	Number of grade 3–5 students at the school	Number of Bluestem nominees at the school	Book Availability to Students	Votes/ Student
Singer	5.72	364	106	0.29	0.54
Wallace	4.20	320	95	0.30	0.44
Babbitt	3.40	203	67	0.33	0.12
Crews	2.62	327	57	0.17	0.30
Yolen	2.58	343	71	0.21	0.26
Keats	2.51	200	84	0.42	0.27
Greenfield	2.46	230	45	0.20	0.86
Bruchac	1.98	285	45	0.16	0.48
Carle	1.94	236	56	0.24	0.34
Park	1.88	268	46	0.17	0.29
Sendak	1.83	281	48	0.17	0.53
Pennypacker	1.74	338	46	0.14	0.26
Wells	1.66	270	38	0.14	0.36
Gutman	1.60	205	37	0.18	0.04
Weeks	1.46	400	45	0.11	0.01
Henkes	1.13	315	30	0.10	0.26
Freedman	1.05	285	37	0.13	0.59
Blume	1.03	392	43	0.11	0.16

Lowry	0.28	185	30	0.16	n/a
Gantos	0.18	264	21	0.08	0.11
Milne	0.11	332	11	0.03	n/a

Bluestem Book Availability Compared to Book Checkouts

Multiple studies have indicated that children access a significant percentage of books they read from a library (Krashen 2004; Edmunds and Bauserman 2006), but students can access the books only if they are available. In this study, I compared the school library's book availability and student checkout rates. Schools with higher Bluestem book availability had higher rates of student checkouts, and schools with lower Bluestem book availability had lower student checkout rates. No schools had high Bluestem book availability and low checkout rates, nor did any school have low Bluestem book availability and high checkout rates. Therefore, data suggests a link between the number of Bluestem books that the school librarian made available and student checkout rates.

Bluestem Book Voting

Casting ballots for their favorite Bluestem book served as an opportunity for students to become further involved with the Bluestem Award. At Singer, the single case study school, 80.4 percent of student questionnaires indicated that they checked out books because they were on the list of Bluestem nominees. AISLE states that student "participants must read, or have read to them, four of the twenty nominated books" to qualify to vote (AISLE 2018). Therefore, Bluestem voting results were included in this study to represent the number of students who read four or more Bluestem books and cast a ballot. Although school librarians may have coached students to adhere to these voting requirements, it is possible that voting numbers were inflated because they included students who voted but did not meet the requirements or were low because students who read the books did not vote.

Book Checkouts Compared to Bluestem Voting

The proportion of schools holding a Bluestem vote within the district was high (90.5 percent). Voting results from fifteen of the participating schools indicated that their Bluestem book checkout rates were very similar to their voting rates; two schools were moderately similar in their rates; and three were less similar. One of the three schools with varied proportions was Keats Elementary. This school had the sixth-highest book checkout rate in the district, but student voting rates were in the middle of the nineteen participating schools. (Two schools did not hold a vote). During the Bluestem election period, the Keats librarian was preparing for a national television studio event featuring her school library, a circumstance that may have decreased the school's voting rates. Even though most schools' rates of checkouts and voting retained consistency, there was more variability between these two data points than between the number of Bluestem books that the librarian made available and student checkout rates.

Analysis of Book Availability, Checkout, and Bluestem Voting

Three data points—book availability, number of checkouts, and voting results—were available for nineteen of the twenty-one schools in the district (see table 4). Fifteen of the schools' book availability, rate of checkouts, and voting rates were strongly associated, and in five of these schools it was extremely associated.

One outlier, Freedman Elementary, had an unusual pattern (see table 4). It had the sixth-lowest book availability with the fourth-lowest Bluestem checkout rate, but the second-highest rate of student voting. No other school had such a dramatic difference between checkout and voting rates. When asked about details of voting at Freedman, the librarian noted that students visited the school library to vote with the entire class (personal correspondence April 11, 2017). Because other schools were not contacted to determine if students voted individually or with the whole class, it is unclear if the entire class voting together at Freedman resulted in a voting increase or decrease. Freedman's school librarian did note that there was a high level of teacher involvement in this school. She wrote that at Freedman, "Teachers read several of the titles to their classes. They keep a visual 'LMC made poster' in their rooms to keep track of the books the class reads together and it's a visual reference/reminder for the students about the books."

These findings suggest that thirteen of the fifteen schools participating in voting indicated an association between book availability, book checkouts, and voting rates. Schools that had greater Bluestem book availability generally had higher checkouts; schools with less Bluestem book availability generally had lower checkouts. Half of the schools also indicated an association between checkouts and voting participation. Furthermore, the type of promotion seemed to affect student interest in checking out Bluestem books.

Discussion

Reflection on Findings Regarding the Bluestem Award

Not only did the findings from the current study's collective case study and single case study answer the three research questions, but they also have additional implications. The school librarians' perceived value of the Bluestem Award may have shaped their promotional activities, which in turn influenced students' behavior (see figure 5 for this interconnecting sequence).

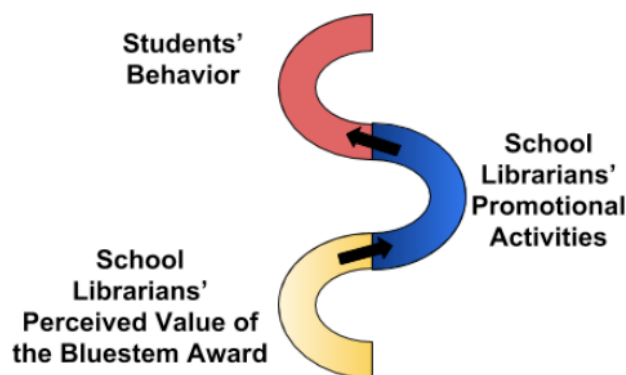


Figure 5. Representation of findings from this research study.

The first part of the interconnected sequence—the school librarians’ perceived value—was gleaned from school librarians’ questionnaire responses. By studying the completed school librarian questionnaires, I learned their perception of students’ checkout of Bluestem nominees, their perception of their students’ motivation to read Bluestem books, the number of the Bluestem books the school librarians read from this year’s list outside the workday, and their rationale for participating in the Bluestem Award process. This perceived value seemed to be a key element for the school librarians’ promotional activities and students’ behavior. Indeed, school librarians’ perceived value mattered because they served as administrators for the Bluestem Award voting and chose whether or not to support the award process. The Lowry librarian, who had a moderate perceived value of the award, originally planned to participate in the Bluestem program. She booktalked the Bluestem books and purchased some additional copies of the books. However, when realizing the registration deadline had passed, she decided not to pursue promotion of the Bluestem Award for 2016–2017 school year. This, in turn, led to a low level of student checkouts. The Milne librarian, having a low perceived value of the award, chose at the beginning of the school year not to participate. On the other hand, nineteen of the twenty-one school librarians indicated a high perceived value of the Bluestem Award, which, in turn, seemed to spark participation in Bluestem promotions, resulting in increased book checkout rates.

Elementary students become less motivated to read for leisure as they age (Guthrie and Wigfield 2000); therefore, all school librarians’ promotional efforts need to be focused on sparking reading motivation, especially for students in upper elementary grades. Zena Sutherland, pioneer in the study of children’s literature, asserted that “children are not born loving good books; neither are they born hating to read. They can be encouraged and influenced in either direction, and that is where we can hope to make a difference” (1997, 5). Indeed, this encouragement and influence is where school librarian book promotion comes into play. This study indicated a link between three variables: book availability, checkouts, and voting. Although these findings did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship, they did show a relationship between (a) the number of books available and student checkout rates and (b) between students’ checkout and voting rates (Ross 2018).

Book checkouts cannot be equated with reading motivation, but they may serve as an indicator of interest in reading. Likewise, participating in Bluestem voting does not guarantee that students read the minimum of four or more books. However, it remains clear: school librarians’ promotions of books matter to students. Both student checkout rates and voting statistics were higher at schools where school librarians provided greater Bluestem book availability and promoted the Bluestem Award. School librarians with a high perceived value of the Bluestem promoted the award books, ultimately having a positive impact on student behavior.

Connections to the Literature

The literature reviewed and this study had common themes, including student readers’ reasons for selecting books, access, book promotion, and choice.

The first theme is student readers’ reasons for selecting books. Findings from previous research and the current study suggest that combined promotional activities over time—rather than one single “magic bullet” promotional activity—may have a greater impact on students’ checkout habits (Guthrie et al. 2006b). Student questionnaires from the single case study school indicated that students had multiple reasons for checking out Bluestem books. Nineteen of the twenty-one

school librarians engaged in three promotional activities over the course of this study, which may have increased the rate of student checkout.

The second theme that emerged from this study was access to books, which is essential for children's literacy development (Gambrell 1996). Marilyn J. Chambliss and Ann Margaret McKillop echoed the importance of access to reading material stating, "Children who are surrounded by material to read, whether printed on paper, accompanied by audiotape, or dancing across a computer screen, are far more likely to read" (2000, 94). School libraries can serve as the reading "heart" of the school (Moreillon 2009, 24) by providing students with various reading materials, including print books, audiobooks, databases, and access to the Internet.

Findings from this study suggest that access to Bluestem books at the school library was important to student checkout habits. Unexpectedly, students did not indicate on their questionnaires that a library's having multiple copies of a title impacted their desire to check out that title. If a school librarian pays the fee, registers for the Bluestem Award, and purchases nominee titles, students have access to participate in the program and read books on the yearly list. Results from this study indicate that school libraries with more Bluestem books available also had higher student checkout rates. This availability of multiple copies of nominated books may have influenced students in one of two ways: 1) when a student visited the school library with an intent to check out a particular Bluestem book, there was an increased likelihood that the book would be available; and 2) a student with no specific intent to check out a Bluestem book may have been encouraged to do so based on the availability of Bluestem books. Either way, increased Bluestem book access seemed to encourage students to check out these books more often.

Although important, book access alone is not enough. Marinak and Gambrell noted that adding a book to a classroom library is not sufficient; instead, it is what a teacher does with that book that makes the difference (2016). School libraries, like their classroom counterparts, must move beyond merely existing as a collection of books. This is where the third theme—book promotion—comes into play. Helping spark interest in reading books, such as those on the 2017 Bluestem Award nomination list, is essential because motivation has been found as a major contributor to student reading achievement (Guthrie et al. 2006a).

School librarians can kindle students' interests in Bluestem books through a variety of promotions such as hosting an election, giving booktalks, and showing book trailers. Nineteen of the twenty-one school librarians held a Bluestem vote, and this proved to be the most popular reason for students to check out the nominated books. Booktalks can also trigger interest in leisure reading, and although experts differ about which booktalking methods are most effective, they agreed that booktalks are a powerful advertising method that motivate students to read (Clower 2010). In this study, seventeen of the twenty-one school librarians reported using booktalks to promote the Bluestem books. Responses from the single case study school's student questionnaires revealed booktalks as the third most popular student reason for checking out Bluestem nominees. Book trailers employ the same techniques as booktalks but take advantage of technology to add a visual component. Within the district, book trailers—students' second most popular response—were used as promotion at fourteen of the twenty-one schools. Although outsiders could perceive book trailers as an individual activity, the case study proved otherwise. At Singer, the case study school, I showed book trailers as part of my Bluestem presentation and watched them with my students. While experiencing the book trailers together, we would laugh at the funny parts, gasp at surprises, and become quiet during serious excerpts. Students would sometimes look at me and then shout, "I am going to check that one out" when a particular book

trailer grabbed their interest. These promotional examples involve personal interactions between students and the school librarian. These student findings can guide school librarians to promote books in ways that students view as the most powerful.

Lastly, choice is essential when it comes to book selection. Although school librarians may promote books on the Bluestem list, children may or may not select those books for leisure reading. Findings from a study of third-grade and fifth-grade students suggested that students are more motivated to read when given opportunities to choose books themselves (Palmer, Codling, and Gambrell 1994).

Despite the forced choice of selecting books from a specific list compiled by adults, children's choice awards such as the Bluestem, posed an additional element of choice not discussed in the literature. The Bluestem Award gave students a platform to cast ballots through school librarian-created elections. Students in third through fifth grades held exclusive power to choose the winning book from the nominee list because no adults were eligible to cast ballots. School librarians submitted student ballots to the state-level election through AISLE to determine the state book winner. Gleaned from the current study, identified themes—the student reader, access, book promotion, and choice—can further the understanding of reading motivation within the realm of the school library (Ross 2018).

Limitations

Participants in this study were from one suburb of a large midwestern city and were delimited to twenty-one elementary school librarians and students in third through fifth grades attending those same schools. The school librarians within the district and students at the single case study school used self-reporting, which may not be completely reliable. Therefore, these results are not generalizable.

In addition, four limitations became clear. First, the completion rate of the student questionnaires was less than 25 percent. Although 2,081 Bluestem books were checked out at the single case study school from August 2016 through March 2017, only 475 student questionnaires were completed. Perhaps students felt pressure to return quickly to class and did not allow themselves the extra minute to complete the questionnaire. If the study were replicated, making laptops available for the sole purpose of completing online questionnaires might increase the students' response rate.

Second, student questionnaires were anonymous, and the same student may have filled out a Bluestem questionnaire every time that student checked out a Bluestem book. Therefore, student responses represented the number of completed questionnaires rather than the number of student participants. Collecting student names in a future study would allow researchers to calculate the number of students rather than the number of questionnaires, leading to a clearer understanding of students' rationale for checking out Bluestem books.

Third, the wording of one sentence on the student questionnaire could have been more child-friendly. Students were asked if “multiple copies” contributed to their rationale to check out a Bluestem book. In a future study, the query could be changed to “because the book was on the shelf,” making the concept of book availability clear to students.

Lastly, when students in third through fifth grades fill out the Student Bluestem Checkout Rationale Questionnaire, they are more apt to choose a provided answer, rather than selecting

“other” and filling in their own answers. Therefore, it is unclear if hearing about the books from friends, teachers, and parents played a part in their Bluestem checkout decision-making.

Future Research

This study focused on Bluestem Award nominee titles, without a group of non-Bluestem books as a control. At Singer Elementary, 80.4 percent of student questionnaire respondents indicated that they checked out books because they were Bluestems. However, it is unclear if these results would change if a study focused on books that were not on a children’s choice award list. A future study could compare two sets of books to determine if the books’ Bluestem status affects the number of student checkouts. For such a future study, one set of books could be children’s choice award books such as Bluestem nominees. The other set of books, which could be referred to as the “Kids Choose” books, could mirror the Bluestem books in terms of popularity, genre, interest, and reading level but not be chosen from a children’s choice award list. A school librarian would then promote the two sets of books in an identical manner. Using circulation data, a researcher could determine if the Bluestem books or the “Kids Choose” books were checked out more often.

The focus of this study was on the role of the school librarian. However, future research could include a longitudinal study that concentrates on the role of the classroom teacher in the context of the children’s choice award program to determine whether the classroom teacher’s involvement influenced student checkout and voting. Additional studies could be expanded to include student social interactions relating to reading including activities such as book clubs and student book discussion.

Conclusions and Recommendations

When a fourth-grader checks out a Bluestem book from the school library, it is not simply because she knows *how* to read; it is also because she *wants* to read. Marinak and Gambrell professed that “students must have both the skill *and* the will to read” (2016, 33). However, not all students choose to read during free time, and elementary school students often become less motivated to read as they age (Guthrie and Wigfield 2000). Previous reading motivation research included classroom teachers’ influence but omitted school librarians. This study fills that gap by focusing on how school librarians can impact student reading motivation through promoting a children’s choice award.

Nineteen of the twenty-one school librarians acquired, processed, displayed, and actively promoted nominee titles to spark student interest. Schools with more Bluestem books fostered a higher rate of Bluestem checkouts. Moreover, school librarians who actively promoted the award helped further trigger student interest in checking out and voting for the award. Data from student questionnaires indicated that promotions with more school librarian interaction—such as booktalks, school librarians and students watching book trailers together, and holding an election were the most impactful (Ross 2018).

These findings suggest that school librarians across the nation should budget time, energy, and money to promote children’s choice awards such as the Bluestem. They must acquire multiple copies of nominated titles to ensure student access. Second, they should focus their efforts on activities that have the greatest personal interaction. By encouraging participation in children’s

choice awards through these actions, school librarians can play an integral part in sparking students' love of reading.

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Appendix A.

School Librarian Questionnaire

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary and our relationship will not change if you choose not to participate. If you initially decide to participate and later want to withdraw, you can do so at any time without penalty.

Name: _____ School Name: _____

- 1) How many years have you been a librarian? _____
- 2) Did your library participate in the Bluestem program this school year?
Circle one: Yes or No
- 3) Why do you choose to participate in the Bluestem Award at your school library?
- 4) How many years has your school held a Bluestem vote? (The first year of the Bluestem Award was 2011. If you only know how many years you participated and not your predecessor, note that as well.) _____.
- 5) Do you see an increase of student motivation for the Bluestem books over the years?
Circle one: Yes or No
- 6) Describe what teachers do to support the Bluestem Award program at your school.

- 7) At my school the Bluestem books are checked out: (check one answer)
 - Much more than other books
 - Slightly more than other books
 - About the same as other books
 - Less than other books
 - Much less than other books
- 8) How many of the Bluestem books from this year's list have you read? _____
- 9) Did you give out any rewards (such as prizes or coupons) connected with the Bluestem program?
Circle one: Yes or No
If yes, what type of prize or coupon?

Do the students know about the rewards ahead of time or are they are surprise?

In your opinion, what effect do these types of rewards have on the students' motivation to read?

10) Will you/did you participate in the Battle of the Bluestems?

Circle one: Yes or No

11) Which promotions did you use with the Bluestem Award this school year?

(Check all that apply)

- Booktalk
- Book trailers for the Bluestem books
- Special section for the books
- Announcements about the Bluestem books
- Hold a Bluestem vote later this year
- Purchase multiple copies of the books
- Posters for Bluestem books
- Other_____

12) The students seem_____ motivated to read the Bluestem books.

- Very
- Somewhat
- Not so
- Not at all

13) What activities connected to your Bluestem program seem to have the largest effect on the students reading motivation at your school?

14) Can you share an anecdote or two about how the Bluestem program has motivated individual students to read more?

Appendix B.

Site Visit Guidelines for School Libraries

Are there Bluestem books available in the school library?

How many copies of each nominee are in the collection? (Use the school's library catalog to answer this question.)

Is there a separate Bluestem book section? If so, where is that section located?

Is there signage to indicate that the Bluestem books are housed in that area?

If so, what does the sign look like?

Are individual books identified as Bluestem books? If so, how?

Are there any fliers in the area for students to take with them? If so, what do they look like?

Are there any posters in the Bluestem area advertising the books? If so, what do they look like?

Is there anything else to note about this school's Bluestem book display?

Appendix C.

Student Bluestem Checkout Rationale Questionnaire

Please read below before filling out this sheet:

Mrs. Hoyle Ross is using information from this sheet for her research. No student names will be used in this study and students can ask Mrs. Hoyle Ross with any questions. Filling out this sheet means that you think it is okay for Mrs. Hoyle Ross to use this information for her study. Students can choose if they want to fill out this sheet or not.

I am in _____.

- 3rd grade
- 4th grade
- 5th grade

I am a _____.

- Boy
- Girl

Put a check in front of the following book that you just checked out.

Absolutely Almost

Lulu's Mysterious Mission

Becoming Babe Ruth

The Misadventures of the Family Fletcher

Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z

Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH

Eddie Red Undercover: Mystery on Museum Mile

Neighborhood Sharks

El Deafo

Rain Reign

The Fourteenth Goldfish

Shooting at the Stars

The Genius Files

Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down

Gone Fishing

Spirit Animals: Wild Born

The Journey that Saved Curious George

Tuck Everlasting

Justin Case: School, Drool, and Other Daily Disasters

The War that Saved My Life

Why do you want to check this book out? Check as many as apply.

- Booktalk
- Book Trailer
- Special section for Bluestem books

- Announcements about Bluestem books
- To vote for the Bluestem Award later in the year
- Multiple copies of the book
- Author of the book
- Bluestem poster
- Other _____

Did you check this book out because it is from the Bluestem list?

Circle one answer: Yes or No

Did the Bluestem list introduce you to a different type of book than you usually read?

Circle one answer: Yes or No

Did the Bluestem list introduce you to a new author?

Circle one answer: Yes or No

Do you plan on reading another Bluestem book?

Circle one answer: Yes or No

Cite This Article

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