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Do third grade students from low-income families have access to 'just right' books? Results from a home visit study

Lauren Capotosto
College of the Holy Cross, USA

Abstract

This study investigated the extent to which third graders (n = 84) from predominantly low-socioeconomic status families had access to books matched to their reading levels in their homes. On average, students showed home visitors books that fell within the Common Core State Standards' recommended text difficulty range for Grade 3 (mean Lexile = 587L). However, students who passed a state-mandated reading test ('good readers') had books with reading demands well below their reading levels. In contrast, students who failed a state-mandated reading test ('poor readers') had books with reading demands well above their reading levels. Findings suggest that poor readers would have limited opportunities to experience successful independent reading in the home, while good readers may find minimal challenge in the books accessible in the home. Findings have implications for efforts dedicated to increasing students' access to books.

Keywords

Book reading, children's books, home, home literacy environment, low-income families, texts

Researchers have repeatedly highlighted differences in the number of books that children from middle-socioeconomic status (SES) and low-SES backgrounds have in their homes. Using data from the National Longitudinal

Corresponding author:
Lauren Capotosto, College of the Holy Cross, 1 College Street, Worcester, MA 01610, USA.
Email: lcapotos@holycross.edu

Survey of Youth, Bradley et al. (2001) found that children whose families met the federal definition of poverty were less likely to have 10 or more books in the home than children living above the poverty line. In a study of 60 students aged 7 to 12 years from six socioeconomically diverse communities in California, Constantino (2005) found that children from low-SES homes had 6 books in the home, compared to 414 books owned by children from high-SES homes.

Such inequities have raised concerns, particularly because studies have shown a correlation between the number of books in the home and student outcomes. For instance, research analyses based on the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (Kindergarten Cohort of 1998) showed positive effects of home resources, including the number of books in the home, on reading outcomes in the early elementary grades, controlling for family socioeconomic status (Aikens and Barbarin, 2008). In a longitudinal study, Judge (2013) found that access to books in the home was an important protective factor in promoting academic resilience.

While extant research has focused on the number of books in the home, it has not accounted for other text features that might impact on children's home reading experiences, such as their access to books well-matched to their reading levels. Yet, educators and policymakers regularly communicate to parents the importance of putting 'just right' texts in the hands of children. For instance, a North Carolina Public Schools website for parents explains the relationship between a reader measure – which represents a student's reading level – and a text measure – which represents the difficulty of a text.

> When a text measure is greater than a reader's measure, comprehension drops dramatically, and the subjective experience is one of frustration, inadequacy, and lack of control. Conversely, when a reader's measure exceeds a text measure, comprehension goes up dramatically, and the reader experiences total control and automaticity. (North Carolina Public Schools Accountability Services Division, n.d.)

With hyperlinks to numerous resources, including the MetaMetrics Find a Book website, the state's Department of Public Instruction parent information website suggests that parents search the Lexile Titles Database to identify books that are appropriately 100L below their child's reading level in order to find well-matched books.

While studies regarding the home literacy environment often measure the quantity of books in the home, little else is known about the nature of

children's home access to books. Given current trends to increase children's book access (Dickinson and Neuman, 2006; Edwards, 2011; Saenz and Feliz, 2007) and to promote reader-text match (e.g., Benjamin, 2012; MetaMetrics, 2008; North Carolina Public Schools Accountability Services Division, n.d.), more detailed information regarding the extent to which children have texts well-matched to their reading levels at home may inform efforts to increase book access. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to describe the extent to which third graders from low-socioeconomic status homes have access to books that match their reading levels.

Background and context

Children's home access to well-matched books

Although studies of children's access to books in the home have generally focused on book quantity (e.g. Burgess et al., 2002; Katzir et al., 2009), two key studies have pointed to a discrepancy between the reading abilities of children and the reading demands of the books that children had in the home. In a qualitative study of student and parents' experiences of a summer reading programme, Compton-Lilly et al. (2016) described the titles of books that children from predominantly low-income backgrounds had in their homes. Interviews with family members revealed that five out of seven child participants and their family members identified books pertaining to popular culture – particularly those that included characters from TV and movies – as their favourite books even though such books often contain challenging vocabulary and syntax.

Similarly, in their ethnographic study of social-class differences in the activities of 32 children from middle-class, working-class and poor families, Chin and Phillips (2004) found that parents of all income levels acquired books for their children to read during the summer. However, even though working-class and poor parents dedicated considerable time and effort to acquiring educational materials for their children, middle-class parents had more information about how to match resources to children's needs. The authors further argued that children from working-class and poor families may have had books that were too challenging for their reading levels. Further research is needed to determine whether these findings replicate with a larger sample, to quantify the difference between reader ability and text demands, and to determine whether this finding holds true for both good and poor readers from predominantly low-income backgrounds.

Text complexity and text difficulty

Text complexity and text difficulty are distinguished by their point of comparison (Allington et al., 2015; Mesmer et al., 2012). Whereas text complexity refers to how easy or hard a text is to read relative to other texts, text difficulty refers to how easy or hard a text is for a reader given one's reading ability (Mesmer et al., 2012). Readability formulas are often used to measure text complexity. For instance, MetaMetrics developed the Lexile Framework, which uses an algorithm that accounts for syntactic (e.g. the frequency with which words appear in a corpus of texts) and semantic features (e.g. sentence length) with continuous prose (Benjamin, 2012; Mesmer and Hiebert, 2015; MetaMetrics, 2017a).

Text difficulty accounts for the relationship between text complexity and the reader's ability (Mesmer et al., 2012). Benjamin (2012) noted that a major appeal of the MetaMetrics Lexile framework, which is used to support the Common Core State Standards' emphasis on complex texts, is its assignment of a Lexile reader level and a Lexile text level, which can then be used to help readers find texts that will be appropriately challenging but still comprehensible. Although the MetaMetrics North Carolina EOG Reading Lexile Linking Report (Metametrics, 2009, 2015) indicates that both text and reader measures involve error, it, too, notes that this error is small, and thus the measures can be useful in predicting the extent to which a reader can comprehend a text.

The Lexile framework uses a modification of the Rasch model to place reader ability and the readability of a text on a common developmental scale (Stenner et al., 2006). It converts student performance on reading assessments into a reader measure and treats a text as a test (Stenner et al., 2006). These conversions make it possible to apply the same psychometric model to determine both reader and text measures (Stenner et al., 2006). The framework uses the difference between the reader measure and text measure to explain reading comprehension. According to the framework, if there is no difference between a reader measure and a text measure, then a reader would be expected to have a 75% comprehension rate. If the reader measure exceeds the text measure, the rate of comprehension will be greater than 75%; in contrast, if the text measure exceeds the reader measure, the rate of comprehension will fall below 75% (Stenner et al., 2006).

Some studies have found maximum benefits when students read near – as opposed to well above or well below – their reading levels. In a study of 636 students in Grades 1–3, Amendum et al. (2016) found that students who read texts at their grade levels scored significantly higher in comprehension than

students who read texts substantially above their grade levels, even when students read the texts with sufficient accuracy. Similarly, in their summer reading intervention in which students received self-selected books, Allington et al. (2015) found that students who chose books at their reading levels outperformed those who self-selected books below their reading levels on reading achievement. In their systematic review of the literature, Amendum et al. (2017) found no studies in which reading well above one's ability improved students' comprehension, particularly without the use of scaffolding.

Findings from these studies explain why MetaMetrics recommends that teachers and parents help children select books generally matched to their reading levels. MetaMetrics (2017a) recommends that a student reads 'from 100L below to 50L above his or her Lexile measure' since 'a reader is expected to comprehend the text well enough to understand it, while still experiencing some reading challenge' at this level (MetaMetrics, 2017a). This band accounts for error, while also expecting that reading texts at or slightly below one's independent reading level is more beneficial for reading comprehension than reading well above one's independent reading level (Kim and Guryan, 2010; Stenner et al., 2006). These suggestions have informed interventions that increase access to well-matched books among students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds (White and Kim, 2008; White et al., 2014).

The present study examines the text difficulty and text complexity of books that third graders from predominantly low-income backgrounds have in the home. First, in response to widespread recommendations to read within one's Lexile band, it describes the extent to which students have books that would be considered well-matched or 'just right' based on this framework. The study addresses the question: How complex and well-matched are the books that students have in the home to their reading levels? Given prior qualitative research that children from low-income backgrounds obtain books from a wide range of sources and report favourite books that have challenging syntax and vocabulary (Chin and Phillips, 2004; Compton-Lilly et al., 2016), I hypothesised that the majority of books that children in the study owned would not match their reading levels. Second, the present study addresses the question: Do good and poor readers have equal access to 'just right' books? Given suggestions that less proficient readers may have more difficulties finding age-appropriate book matches (Mol and Bus, 2011), I hypothesised that less proficient readers would have more books that exceed their reading levels than more proficient readers.

Method

Participants

Families participating in the current study were involved in a larger study of READS (Reading Enhances Achievement During Summer; Kim et al., 2016). This intervention is a randomised-controlled experiment intended to provide students predominantly from low-income schools with access to books matched to their reading levels and interests during the summer months. Approximately one-quarter (23%) of treatment and control families from the participating 10 schools in Durham, North Carolina, one of the three participating school districts, were randomly selected to participate in a home visit study prior to participating in the intervention.

Eighty-four ($n = 84$) students and their families participated in the home visit study during the spring of Grade 3 in 2012. Students attended 10 schools in Durham, North Carolina in which 79–100% of students were economically disadvantaged. Families in the present study were visited by teams of two home visitors, including bilingual Spanish–English speakers, for approximately one hour. Home visitors, comprised of both graduate students from nearby universities and educators from the local community, participated in a 6-hour training session to ensure that the same protocol and the same language were used during each home visit. To ensure a common home visit experience for participants, educators were not assigned to visit students from their own schools. There were 11 home visitors in total, with five teams each consisting of two home visitors plus one back-up home visitor to fill in as needed. Two of the home visit teams were bilingual Spanish–English speakers, with one home visitor on each of these teams a native Spanish speaker. Parents had the option of completing the home visit in English or Spanish, and 28% of parents chose the latter. While children, all of whom were enrolled in mainstream English-only classrooms, completed their protocols in English, these parents completed their questionnaires and interviews in Spanish. The majority of children in the present study were Black (69%) and/or Hispanic (25%) and received free or reduced priced lunch (88%). Approximately 17% of students were designated as Limited English Proficient (LEP).

Study design and context

Like many states, North Carolina has linked state assessment data with The Lexile Framework for Reading (MetaMetrics, 2009). The state's Department of Public Instruction's recommendation that parents help children select books

appropriately 100L below their child's reading level generally aligns with MetaMetrics's (2008) recommendation to parents that children read books within 50L above to 100 below one's reader Lexile measure.

Home visitors explained to the children that they were interested in learning about the books the students had in their homes. Home visitors began the activity by explaining to third graders, 'I'm interested in learning more about the books that you have. Can you bring me one of your favourite books that is not too hard and not too easy?' If children were able to show home visitors at least one book, home visitors responded, 'Thanks for bringing this book. I would love to see other books that you have. Do you think that you have nine more books? Can you bring them to me?' Home visitors prompted students to continue bringing books until they had shown 10 books or the child reported not having more books in the home. Because the goal of this activity was to understand children's access to books in the home broadly, as opposed to book ownership specifically, children were permitted to show library books. Home visitors recorded the titles and authors of books.

Ten books was selected as the maximum because evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth suggests that children whose families meet the federal definition of poverty were less likely than non-poor children to own 10 or more books (Bradley et al., 2001) and prior research has similarly used 10 or more children's books as an indicator of the home literacy environment (Gottfried et al., 2015). Approximately 58.3% of students showed home visitors 10 books; 28.6% of students showed five or fewer books.

Data sources and key variables

Reading achievement. The present study uses two indicators of reading achievement to examine the relationship between reading skills and text complexity and text difficulty. First, student performance on the reading comprehension section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) Level 9, Form A is an indicator of a student's reading comprehension in the spring of Grade 3. According to the Iowa Assessments Research and Development Guide (Hoover et al., 2003), these tests were designed to reflect the national population in terms ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Normed in 2005, this standardised measure of reading comprehension has a high level of internal consistency, with Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) coefficients exceeding .93 and equivalent form estimates at or above .86 (Hoover et al., 2003).

Second, whether students passed or failed the Grade 3 North Carolina English Language Arts End-of-Grade (EOG) Reading Comprehension

standardised test during their first testing attempt is a second indicator of Grade 3 reading comprehension. Multiple-choice assessment items reflect Marzano's thinking skills levels, with each level representing a different level of abstraction (i.e. knowing, organising, applying, generating, integrating and evaluating). The coefficient alpha index of 0.92 indicates high reliability (Mbella, Zhu, Karkee et al.; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2016). Approximately 32% of students in the present study passed the EOG on their first attempt. As expected, whether students passed the EOG is positively and significantly correlated with Grade 3 ITBS Reading Comprehension scores ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$).

Reader Lexile measure

Like several states, North Carolina has partnered with MetaMetrics to convert its state assessment, the North Carolina EOG, into Reader Lexile measures in order to facilitate matching texts to students' reading levels. Because North Carolina has linked its state reading assessment to The Lexile Framework, this study uses the converted Lexile scores obtained from the Grade 3 NC EOG Reading assessment as the student's reader Lexile measure.

The average Lexile reader measure was 505.89 ($SD = 289.13$). Students who passed the EOG had an average Lexile reader measure of 839.07 ($SD = 151.67$); students who failed the EOG had an average Lexile reader measure of 348.07 ($SD = 185.34$). Based on linking studies conducted with the Lexile framework, the correlation between the Lexile measure and the North Carolina EOG is 0.88 to 0.89 (Mbella et al., 2016).

Text complexity. The author and a research assistant obtained information regarding the Lexile – or readability level – of books from the MetaMetrics Lexile Text Measure Database in 2016. The research team obtained hard copies of books that were not in the MetaMetrics Lexile Text Measure Database. The author and research assistant manually entered the first 1,000 words of these books into the MetaMetrics Lexile Analyzer software to obtain an approximate Lexile level of a book. There was no statistically significant difference between the Lexile levels of books obtained through the MetaMetrics Lexile Text Measure Database and the approximate Lexile levels obtained using the MetaMetrics Lexile Analyzer. Overall, we obtained Lexile information for 84% of the books that students showed home visitors; Lexile information for the remaining books was unavailable either because the books were non-prose, and thus the Lexile framework cannot be applied, or because books could not be located. There was no significant or meaningful difference in the

number of books missing Lexile data because they could not be located shown by students who failed (1.30 books) or passed the EOG (1.28 books) ($t = 0.06$, $p = 0.95$).

Because the text complexity measures in this paper combine both official MetaMetrics book Lexile levels and estimated Lexile levels obtained from the Lexile Analyzer, all references to text complexity and text difficulty from this point forward should be interpreted as estimated Lexile levels. The average Lexile level of books that children had in the home is an indicator of text complexity. MetaMetrics has since updated text Lexile levels, largely for early readers and books geared towards young children to incorporate more dimensions of text complexity (Elmore and Sipper, 2017).

Text difficulty. Consistent with prior studies of reader-text match (Kim and Guryan, 2010), text difficulty is represented by the difference between the reader's Lexile – converted from the Grade 3 NC EOG Reading test– and the mean Lexile of books in the home at each home visit. Seventy-eight ($n = 78$) students in the sample had at least one book for which text complexity was available, and thus text difficulty data were available. Text difficulty values above 0 reflect that the student's reader Lexile score was above the mean Lexile of books in the home, whereas text difficulty values below 0 reflect that the student's reader Lexile score was below the mean Lexile of books in the home.

The present study also applied the MetaMetrics recommendations for independent reading to create additional indicators of text difficulty. Specifically, MetaMetrics (2015) notes that for books ranging 'from 100L below to 50L above his or her Lexile measure . . . a reader is expected to comprehend the text well enough to understand it, while still experiencing some reading challenge' (MetaMetrics, 2017a). Thus, a categorical variable represented whether the average text difficulty of books was 'easy' (more than 100L below a reader's Lexile), 'just right' (between 100L below to 50L above a reader's Lexile) or 'hard' (more than 50L above a reader's Lexile) for a given student. These categories do not account for other factors that may make texts more or less comprehensible to readers, such as demands on background knowledge.

In addition to using an indicator of the mean text difficulty of all books that a student showed during the home visit, the present study also examines the number of 'easy', 'just right', and 'hard' books shown, as well as the percentage of the books each student showed home visitors that fell into these three categories. The purpose of quantifying text difficulty in three ways – mean Lexile of all books shown, number of books in each category, and percentage

of all books in each category – was to determine whether the conclusions from this study were robust to various conceptualisations of the text difficulty construct.

Results

Research Question #1: How complex and well-matched are the books that students have in the home to their reading levels?

Descriptive statistics were used to address the first research question regarding the text complexity and text difficulty of books that Grade 3 students had in their homes.

Text complexity. On average, students had books with a mean of 587L, which is within the Grade 3 range of 520L–820L (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010; MetaMetrics, 2017b). Specifically, 56% of students had books with mean Lexile levels within this Grade 3 range of 520L–820L. Approximately 36% of students had books with mean Lexile levels below the standard Grade 3 text measure (150L–515L), and 8% of students had books with mean Lexile levels above the standard Grade 3 text measure (845L–1,100L).

Text difficulty. On average, students had books that were 75 Lexile points above their reading level, which is more difficult than MetaMetrics (2015) recommends to experience challenge without frustration. Approximately 50% of students had books averaging 50 Lexile points above their Lexile reader score and 24% of students had books averaging 100 points below their Lexile reader score.

Students also had more 'hard' books than 'easy' or 'just right' books in the home. On average, students had 2.02 easy books, 0.97 appropriately challenging books, and 3.54 hard books. Thus, the findings are consistent in that students had more books above their reading levels than books at or below their reading levels in the home. Overall, findings suggest that students have greater access to books that may be too difficult for them to read independently than they do to either easy or 'just right' books.

Research Question #2: Do good and poor readers have equal access to 'just right' books?

To address the second goal of examining the relationship between text difficulty and reading achievement, pairwise correlations and paired t-tests and chi-square tests of independence were examined. I use the terms 'more proficient' and 'less proficient' readers when referring to correlational analyses that used the ITBS, a continuous measure of reading achievement. When reporting results from t-tests and chi-square analyses, I use the terms 'good readers' to refer to students who passed the EOG on the first attempt and 'poor readers' in reference to students who failed the EOG on the first attempt.

As shown in Table 1, there was a small positive correlation ($p < 0.05$) between student performance on the Grade 3 ITBS Reading Comprehension test and text complexity (i.e. the mean Lexile of books in the home). In other words, students with higher reading comprehension scores had books with greater reading demands. Moreover, a positive relationship between Grade 3 reading comprehension and text difficulty suggests that more proficient readers had greater home access to books that were written below their reading levels than less proficient readers. In contrast, students with 10 or more books

Table 1. Estimated correlation matrix among student reading achievement and characteristics of books students showed home visitors, including text complexity, text difficulty and quantity of books.

	Grade 3 ITBS Reading Comprehension	NC EOG 3 Test passed	Text complexity	Text difficulty	10+ books
Grade 3 ITBS Reading Comprehension	1				
NC EOG 3 Test passed	0.661***	1			
Text complexity (mean Lexile of books shown)	0.255*	0.219∼	1		
Text difficulty (Reader Lexile – Mean Lexile of books)	0.622***	0.641***	−0.346**	1	
10+ books	0.084	−0.124	−0.208∼	−0.114	1

ITBS: Iowa Test of Basic Skills; NC EOG 3: whether a student passed the North Carolina End-of-Grade 3 Reading Test on the first attempt; Text complexity: mean Lexile of books that students showed home visitors; Text difficulty: difference between the student's 'reader Lexile', obtained as a conversion score Grade 3 NC EOG Reading assessment, and the mean Lexile of books that students showed home visitors; 10+ books: binary indicator of whether students showed home visitors at least 10 books.
$\sim p < 0.10$, $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

were no more or less likely to have books that were more closely matched to their reading levels or books with higher or lower text measures.

Results from paired t-tests consistently showed that 'good readers' (i.e. those who passed the EOG on the first attempt) had greater access to easy books than 'poor readers' (i.e. those who failed the EOG on the first attempt). As shown in Table 2, poor readers had books that averaged 202.91L above their reading levels while good readers had books that averaged 196.57L below their reading levels. These differences persisted upon examining both the number of 'easy', 'just right' and 'hard' books, as well as the percentage of all books students showed in each of these three categories. Specifically, good

Table 2. Comparison of the characteristics of books in the home shown to home visitors by students who passed ('good readers') and failed ('poor readers') North Carolina End-of-Grade 3 Reading assessment.

	Poor readers		Good readers			
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*T*	Diff. in means
Average Lexile of books	560.18	186.14	644.43	157.03	−1.96∼	−84.25
Average difference between reader Lexile and book Lexile	−202.91	238.15	196.57	197.51	−7.28***	−399.48
# of easy books	1.25	1.84	3.68	2.93	−4.48***	−2.43
# of just right books	0.98	1.12	0.96	1.10	0.08	0.02
# of hard books	4.74	2.92	1.00	1.41	6.05***	3.74
% of easy books	17.94	25.22	63.21	36.85	−6.35***	−45.27
% of just right books	14.64	18.83	19.40	26.03	−.92	−4.76
% of hard books	67.42	33.32	17.39	0.25	6.69***	50.03
	%		%		χ^2	
% of students with books average in easy range	7.55		64.00		28.39***	
% of students with books average in just right range	20.75		32.00		1.17	
% of students with books average in hard range	71.70		4.00		31.14***	

∼$p < .10$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Note: Average Lexile of books sample size = 84 students; all other information based on sample size of 78 students after narrowing sample to students who showed at least one book and for whom text Lexile levels could be obtained. Average Lexile of books = text complexity; average difference between reader Lexile and book Lexile = text difficulty; # of easy books = # of books that students showed home visitors that were more than 100L below reader's Lexile measure; # of just right books = # of books that students showed home visitors that were between 100L below and 50L above reader's Lexile measure; # of hard books = # of books that students showed home visitors more than 50L above reader's Lexile measure. Percentages of easy, just right, and hard books refer to the percentages of all books for which Lexile levels were available that children showed home visitors in each category.

readers showed 3.68 books that were 100L or more below their reading levels, while poor readers showed just 1.25 books that were 100L or more below their reading levels ($t = -4.48$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, good readers showed one book that was 50L or more above their reading levels while poor readers showed 4.74 books that were 50L or more above their reading levels ($t = 6.05$, $p < 0.001$).

There was no meaningful or significant difference in the number of 'just right' books that good (0.96 books) or poor readers (0.98 books) showed home visitors. As shown in Figure 1, of all the books for which Lexile levels were available that good readers showed home visitors, 63% were 'easy' – more than 100L below their reading level – while 17% were 'hard' – more than 50L above their reading level. In contrast, of all the books for which Lexile levels were available that poor readers showed home visitors, 18% were 'easy' while 67% were 'hard'.

As shown in Table 2, chi-square tests of independence corroborated the finding that poor readers had less access to 'easy books' in the home than good readers. In this analysis, categorical variables were used to indicate whether the mean text difficulty of books in the home fell into the 'easy', 'just right' or 'hard' range. Whereas 64% of good readers had books that averaged in the 'easy' range (mean Lexile levels 100L or more below their reading levels), only 8% of poor students had books averaging in this easy range. Conversely,

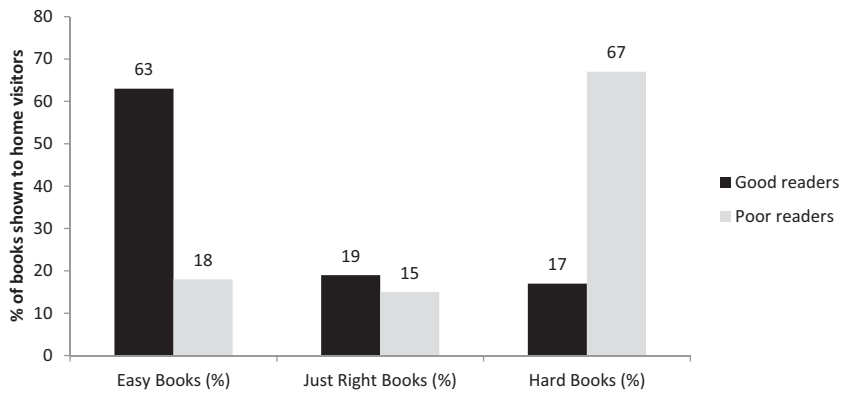

Figure 1. Percentage of books with available Lexile data that students showed home visitors that were easy, just right, and hard, by good and poor readers. 'Easy' books are those that are more than 100L below reader's Lexile measure. 'Just right' are those that fall between 100L below and 50L above a reader's Lexile measure. 'Hard' books are those that are more than 50L above reader's Lexile measure. The term 'good readers' refers to students who passed the North Carolina End-of-Grade 3 reading assessment, and the term 'poor readers' refers to students who failed the same test on the first attempt.

while approximately 4% of good readers had books that averaged in the 'hard' range (mean Lexile levels greater than 50L above their reading levels), 72% of poor readers had books in this range.

Next, I replicated the analysis using a sub-sample of students who showed fewer than 10 books in the home – approximately one-third of the student sample. Narrowing the sample to students who showed fewer than 10 books reduces the likelihood that good and poor readers self-selected different types of books to show home visitors since they were essentially showing all of the books that they had in the home. This set of analyses generally replicated the finding that poor readers had more access to books above their reading levels than good readers. Specifically, good readers had books 149L below their reading levels, while poor readers had books 247L above their reading levels ($t = -4.09$, $p < 0.001$). While there was no significant difference between the number of just right books that good and poor readers showed home visitors, poor readers had more books that were 50L or more above their reading levels (3.56 books) than good readers (0.82 book) ($t = 3.36$, $p = 0.002$). Moreover, good readers had more books that were more than 100L below their reading levels (1.64 books) than poor readers (0.39 books) ($t = 3.27$, $p = 0.003$). Thus, the fact that the analyses with a sub-sample of students who showed home visitors all the books they reported having in the home generally replicated the findings from the larger student sample suggests that findings in this study are not primarily a function of (a) the censored nature of the measurement (i.e. limit of 10 books shown) or (b) good and poor readers interpreting or responding to the research prompt differently.

I conducted a final set of subgroup analyses to explore the heterogeneity in reader-text match within the reading ability groups (i.e. good and poor readers). Specifically, I conducted t-tests to determine whether (a) students who passed the EOG with reader Lexile scores above and below the 75th percentile on national norms (760L, MetaMetrics, 2017c) and (b) students who failed the EOG with reader Lexile scores above and below the 25th percentile on national norms (415L, MetaMetrics, 2017c) had books with different levels of text difficulty. Findings indicate that reader-text discrepancies were substantial for the most and least proficient readers and much smaller for students with Lexile scores between the 25th and 75th percentiles. Whereas poor readers (i.e. those who failed the EOG) with Lexile scores above the 25th percentile had books that averaged only 83 points above their reading levels, poor readers with Lexile scores below the 25th percentile had books that averaged 295 points above their reading levels ($t = -3.57$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, while

good readers (i.e., those who passed the EOG) with reader Lexile scores below the 75th percentile had books that averaged only 41 points below their reading levels, good readers with Lexile scores above the 75th percentile had books that averaged 270 points above their reading levels ($t = 3.17$, $p = 0.004$).

A list of the 'just right' and 'worst-matched' books for the most and least proficient readers in the sample can be found in Appendix 1. 'Worst-matched' books for good readers were those that fell one standard deviation above the average text difficulty for students with reader Lexile levels above the 75th percentile. 'Worst-matched' books for poor readers were those that fell one standard deviation below the average text difficulty level for students with reader Lexile levels below the 25th percentile.

While an analysis of the themes and specific linguistic features in each book is beyond the scope of this study, it is noteworthy that books on the 'just right' and 'worst-matched' lists for both poor and good readers vary in terms of complexity of themes. The 'worst-matched' books for poor readers included both books from the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series by Jeff Kinney, as well as books that include more complex issues, such as racism in *The Gold Cadillac* by Mildred D Taylor (1987) and *The Greatest: Muhammad Ali* by Walter Dean Myers (2001). The 'just right' books included both grade-appropriate books from chapter series, such as the *Junie B. Jones* series by Barbara Park and titles that appear on the top 25 fiction and nonfiction books for kindergarten (*The Cat in the Hat* (1957) and *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960a) by Dr. Seuss) (Renaissance Learning, Inc., 2016). Similarly, the 'worst-matched' books for good readers included both books written for younger students, including *The Best Nest* (1968) by P.D. Eastman and books popular with third graders, such as *The Black Lagoon* series by Mike Thaler. The 'just right' books for good readers included both age-appropriate books, such as *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney and books more commonly read at the upper elementary and middle school grades, including *The Giver* by Lois Lowry.

Discussion

The present study aimed to describe the extent to which third graders from predominantly low-income families had books matched to their reading levels and to determine whether good and poor readers had equal access to 'just right' books. While numerous studies have explored children's access to books in the home (e.g. Aikens and Barbarin, 2008; Bradley et al., 2001; Burgess et al., 2002; Katzir et al., 2009), few studies have examined the home literacy environment in terms of access to 'just right' books. Such a study is important

given state- and school-wide calls for students to read at their independent reading levels. Findings from the present study suggest that within a high-poverty community, variability in the books that children have in the home extends beyond quantity; there is also variation in the extent to which students have access to books well-matched to their reading levels.

Regardless of how the present study defined text difficulty, the most proficient readers had books that averaged below their reader Lexile while the least proficient readers in the sample had books that averaged above their reader Lexile. While prior research has suggested that students from low-SES families may have books that are above their reading levels (Chin and Phillips, 2004; Compton-Lilly et al., 2016), the present study quantifies and extends these conclusions by suggesting that the direction of the reader-text match differs for good and poor readers.

Given these differences, the reader-text match framework predicts that good and poor readers will have meaningfully different home reading experiences. Good readers may have fewer opportunities to experience reading challenges in the home that would be associated with desirable difficulties (Bjork and Bjork, 2011; Fulmer et al., 2015) or require adult scaffolding that could help stretch their learning (Vygotsky, 1978). In contrast, poor readers may have fewer opportunities to experience successful independent reading since the books available in the home are beyond their 'just right' reading levels.

However, the present study cannot confirm that poor readers would struggle to read independently and comprehend all of the books shown that were beyond their reading level. As Hiebert (2012) explains, 'like temperature readings, Lexile scores are a good first source of information . . . but they cannot do the whole job' of determining whether a book is a good match for a student (p. 3). In their critique of the use of recommended reading bands, Dzaldov and Peterson (2005) argue that traditional measures of readability – like the Lexile framework which accounts for semantic and syntactic demands – fail to 'take into account the interests, motivations, background experience and knowledge or the sociocultural identities of the readers in the determination of book appropriateness for individuals' (Dzaldov and Peterson, 2005: 223). Research has demonstrated that poor readers with considerable background knowledge on a topic may better comprehend a text than good readers with less background knowledge about a topic (Recht and Leslie, 1988; Wolfe et al., 1998). While Lexile measures account for semantic and syntactic features, they do not account for other characteristics, including literary devices, themes and demands on background knowledge that contribute to text complexity (Williamson et al., 2013). Thus, even though *Diary of a*

Wimpy Kid (Kinney, 2007) was categorised as too hard for many less proficient readers in this study, these students might nonetheless have comprehended the book given its simple themes, accessible vocabulary, picture scaffolding and minimal demands placed on background knowledge (Hiebert, 2014).

Findings from this study also do not suggest that efforts to increase book access should supplant poorly-matched books in the home. Parents of less-proficient readers may provide more assistance to their children, especially when reading books above their reading level. Given that word reading difficulties can limit less-proficient readers' access to sophisticated language and concepts while reading independently (Nation, 2007), such reading aloud to children can be beneficial, as it can increase children's exposure to complex vocabulary and ideas (Santoro et al., 2016).

Moreover, an examination of the 'just right' book titles shown by less proficient readers calls into question the desirability of using quantitative readability measures to identify 'just right' books without also considering more qualitative factors, including age-appropriateness and themes. For instance, among the 'best match' books for the least proficient readers were Dr. Seuss books. While these books provide opportunities for poor readers to develop what Lesaux (2012) refers to as 'skills-based competencies' (i.e. word reading and fluency), they provide fewer opportunities for typical third graders to stretch their 'knowledge-based competencies' (i.e. vocabulary, background knowledge) (Lesaux, 2012). Conversely, while *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993) was categorised as a 'just right' book for one good reader, the complex themes in the book may not be fully understood in Grade 3. Such findings are consistent with the North Carolina Department of Education's recommendation that parents use the Lexile framework to help their children select books, but also recognises that a child's interests and parental views of developmental appropriateness should guide decisions, as well (North Carolina Public Schools Accountability Services Division, n.d.).

The present study aims to describe differences in access to well-matched books between more and less proficient readers; causal conclusions regarding the relationship between access to well-matched books and reading achievement cannot and should not be drawn from the present study. Rather, the findings may reflect the particular challenges that families of less proficient readers may face when trying to access well-matched books. When acquiring books for the home, families of poor readers may be forced to choose between age-appropriate content and opportunities to develop knowledge-based skills or the match between a reader's skills and the semantic and syntactic demands of a book (Mol and Bus, 2011).

While readability measures provide an important starting point for examining texts, it is still necessary 'for users to do hands-on analyses of texts' (Hiebert, 2012: 3). Families of less proficient readers, in particular, may face a particularly daunting task of accessing books well-matched to children's reading skills and appropriately engaging for one's age, as the selection of age-appropriate texts for students reading below grade level may be more limited than age-appropriate texts for students reading at their grade level (Mol and Bus, 2011). Families of less proficient readers may need guidance in selecting or accessing age-appropriate books that their children can read independently and may benefit from resources such as the School Library Journal's hi/lo book selections (high interest-lower reading demands). Such guidance may be particularly helpful for families of children who are dual language learners and who may depend upon expert advice when selecting books for their children that are written in English. Likewise, institutions, such as state departments of education, that encourage parents and teachers to assist in matching readers with texts may acknowledge the unique difficulties that children reading well below grade level may face and recommend resources accordingly.

Limitations

Findings from this study must be considered in light of its limitations. First, the present study examines the books in students' homes at a single time point, but the extent to which students have books at, within and below their reading levels may change over time. For instance, good readers and poor readers may acquire 'just right' and 'hard' books at the same rate, but the pace at which they develop skills that exceed text demands may differ. Further study is needed to determine whether and how the match between reader and text changes over time. In addition, narrowing the books that students show to those that students have recently or are currently reading may limit the extent to which students show childhood favourite books that they no longer read. However, findings from the present study are noteworthy as they suggest that good and poor readers enter the summer break with varying access to comprehensible books.

Second, while the present study conceptualises text complexity and difficulty in terms of Lexile levels, or semantic and syntactic demands, research suggests that a range of other text characteristics factor into the extent to which a reader will comprehend its content. In their study of predominantly bilingual and economically disadvantaged high school students, Reed and Kershaw-Herrera (2016) found that adolescent reading is 'dually influenced by a

text's readability and cohesion' (p. 91). Consistent with theories of coherence in discourse processing (Kintsch, 1991), they suggested that strong text cohesion may allow readers to overcome the limitations of working memory in otherwise challenging texts. Similarly, Fitzgerald et al. (2014) found that text organisation indicators such as phrase diversity and text density strongly influenced reading outcomes in the early grades. It is important to note that MetaMetrics has updated its Lexile database to account for the 'syntactic and semantic factors as well as the decoding challenges and the degree of repetition and patterning common in many early-reading texts' (Elmore and Sipper, 2017: para. 4). Thus, books that were once considered good matches at the time of the study may now be poor matches and vice versa. Further research using comprehensive qualitative and quantitative measures of text complexity, including systematic thematic analyses, is needed to determine whether good and poor readers differ in their access to books beyond the match between reader and text Lexile levels.

Third, the present study did not assess students' comprehension of each of the books. The categorisation of books as easy, hard or just right was based entirely on the match between the reader Lexile and the text Lexile. As previously noted, there is error in both text and reader measures. Moreover, strengths and weaknesses of the individual reader must be considered alongside the multiple factors that explain a text's complexity, including syntactic and semantic features, as well as demands on background knowledge. Further research is needed to determine the extent to which students can comprehend the books in their homes.

Future research examining the extent to which students have books matched to their reading levels in the home should also consider how students obtain each book and whether they read the books independently or with others in the home. Such information is needed to shed light on how much support students, particularly less proficient readers, receive when reading texts that exceed their independent reading levels.

It is also important to note that book access in any form reflects just one dimension of the home literacy environment – a broad construct that includes the literacy-related opportunities and resources that a home provides children – and is not the only home-based component that can impact on literacy development (Burgess et al., 2002). Future studies of children's access to well-matched books may also account for informal literacy activities in the home, such as shared book reading and parent-child conversations, as well as formal activities such as teaching children to read and write (Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994; Schmitt et al., 2011; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002).

Reading widely for pleasure is critical to 'nurturing a lexical legacy' in which children read and encounter a wide range of words and concepts, both in and out of school, particularly in the summer months (Nation, 2007). Yet, efforts that aim simply to increase elementary students' access to books without accounting for both quantitative and qualitative text characteristics, including but not limited to age-appropriateness, themes and text difficulty may result in reducing students' opportunities to read age-appropriate books for pleasure, while also limiting less proficient readers' occasions to develop knowledge-based competencies through independent reading.

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ORCID iD

Lauren Capotosto https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4291-9950

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Appendix 1. Titles and authors of books shown by most and least proficient readers in sample.

Worst-matched books shown by students with reader Lexile <25th percentile.

Title	Author
Bear-ly There	Rebekah Raye
Captain Underpants and the Big Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy	Dav Pilkey
Captain Underpants And The Preposterous Plight Of The Purple Potty People	Dav Pilkey
Debby Ryan: Her Sweet Life	Riley Brooks
Diary of a Wimpy Kid	Jeff Kinney
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Cabin Fever	Jeff Kinney
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Dog Days	Jeff Kinney
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Rodrick Rules	Jeff Kinney
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Last Straw	Jeff Kinney
Diary of a Wimpy Kid: The Ugly Truth	Jeff Kinney
Encyclopedia Brown Takes the Cake	Donald Sobol
Ferdinand	Munro Leaf
Fire!	Joy Masoff
Football: How It Works	Angieszka Biskup
James and the Giant Peach	Roald Dahl
Jesse Owens: Fastest Man Alive	Carole Boston Weatherford
Marley and Me	John Grogan
Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle	Betty MacDonald
My Father's Dragon	Ruth S. Ganett
Ninjago	Tracey West
Sounder	William H. Armstrong
Stuart Little	E.B. White
Super Shortstops	James Buckley
The Further Adventures of Hank the Cowdog	John R. Erickson
The Gold Cadillac	Mildred Taylor
The Greatest: Muhammad Ali	Walter Dean Myers
The Lightning Thief	Rick Riordan
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe	C.S. Lewis

(continued)

Continued

Title	Author
The Magician's Nephew	C.S. Lewis
The Woman Who Outshone the Sun	Alejandro Cruz Martinez
Willow Smith: Pop's Newest Princess	Riley Brooks
Winnie the Pooh and the Honey Tree	Disney
Wreck Trek	Angie Belcher

Just-right books shown by students with reader Lexile <25th percentile.

Title	Author
Biscuit Goes to School	Alyssa Capucelli
Danny & the Dinosaur	Syd Hoff
Eek and Ack Invaders	Blake A. Hoena
Fox at School	Edward Marshall
George and Martha Back in Town	James Marshall
George and Martha Rise and Shine	James Marshall
Green Eggs and Ham	Dr. Seuss
Horrible Harry Goes to the Moon	Suzy Kline
Horrid Henry	Francesca Simon
Jigsaw Jones	James Preller
Junie B Jones and Meanie	Barbara Park
Junie B Jones and Some Sneaky	Barbara Park
Junie B Jones Cheater	Barbara Park
Junie B Jones First Grader at Last	Barbara Park
Junie B Jones is a Party Animal	Barbara Park
Junie B. First Grader: Dumb Bunny	Barbara Park
Junie B. Jones and the Yucky Blucky Fruitcake	Barbara Park
Junie B. Jones Is Not a Crook	Barbara Park
One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish	Dr. Seuss
Read and Learn Bible	Scholastic
Sleepy Dog	Harriet Ziefert
The Best Thanksgiving	Carolyn Clark
The Cat in the Hat	Dr. Seuss
The Very Busy Spider	Eric Carle
Too Many Mice	Barbara Brenner
Vikings Ships at Sunrise (Magic Tree)	Mary Pope Osborne

Worst-matched books shown by students with reader Lexile > 75th percentile.

Title	Author
Frog and Toad Together	Arnold Lobel
I'll Catch the Moon	Nina Crews
Junie B. Jones: Boss of Lunch	Barbara Park
Junie B., First Grader: Toothless Wonder	Barbara Park
Midnight on the Moon	Mary Pope Osborne
Oh the Thinks You Can Think	Dr. Seuss
Pinkalicious	Victoria Kann
Power of Three Warriors: Dark River	Erin Hunter
Power of Three Warriors: Eclipse	Erin Hunter
Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter	Diane Stanley
Shrek Forever After	Anne Hughes
The Best Nest	P.D. Eastman
The Class Trip from the Black Lagoon	Mike Thaler
The Talent Show from the Black Lagoon	Mike Thaler
Where Do Balloons Go	Jamie Lee Curtis

Title	Author
A Christmas Carol	Charles Dickens
Beezus and Ramona	Beverly Cleary
Diary of a Wimpy Kid	Jeff Kinney
Henry and Beezus	Beverly Cleary
Henry and Ribsy	Beverly Cleary
Henry Huggins	Beverly Cleary
Tales of Benjamin Bunny	Beatrix Potter
The Giver	Lois Lowry
When Marian Sang	Pam Muñoz Ryan