

# PREPARING PRESERVICE TEACHERS: COLLABORATING WITH THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN TO DEVELOP DYNAMIC CLASSROOM LIBRARIES

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## Abstract

*Recent graduates of our university's School Library and Information Science program participated in an informal study of ways librarians collaborate with classroom teachers. Although the librarians' feedback provided very useful data for our program accreditation review, their feedback revealed unexpected findings. These findings from the librarians' led us to survey the knowledge and skills of preservice teachers in our teacher preparation program to determine if our teacher preparation program is embedding the knowledge and skills teachers need to establish and implement dynamic classroom libraries as resources to integrate into the curriculum. Results from both surveys produced a powerful call to action for our preservice teacher preparation program.*

Keywords: Librarians, collaboration teacher preparation

The results from a routine program assessment tool given to newly practicing school librarian graduates revealed that classroom libraries were limited in the school districts in which they worked. Some teachers in their districts seemed unaware of the potential impact that a classroom library can have on children's reading habits and attitudes as readers. Teachers were also surprised by the librarian's offer to support teachers in their teaching and implementation of a dynamic classroom library.

The findings from the school library program assessment led to informal interviews among the university's undergraduate students in the teacher preparation program. It was concluded that there is a critical need to increase preservice teachers' awareness of the importance of classroom libraries and the value of teacher-librarian collaboration in the teacher preparation program. Expanding preservice teachers' awareness of the transformational power inherent in well-used classroom libraries, aligned with curriculum, may have far-reaching effects in children's reading lives in and out of school. Long-term,

children's skills, confidence, and transformed attitudes about themselves as readers is a predictable possibility. Similarly, expanding preservice teachers' awareness of the expertise and value of the school librarian as a collaborative instructional partner could lead to teachers being proactive in developing collaborative partnerships in practice.

### **Literature Review**

Classroom libraries have been promoted in the literature for quite some time. As early as 1879, there is evidence of classroom libraries being planned and created by the students in the classrooms with the help of public librarians (since there were no school libraries at the time) (Cummings, 1943). Helen Parkhurst argued, "a well-equipped library played an important part in carrying...curriculum" (as cited in Cummings, 1943, p. 13). "Many classroom teachers favored the room library because they felt that it did much to cultivate an appreciation for, and an interest in literature as well as to increase the quantity of reading done" (Cummings, 1943, p 14).

School libraries are now firmly established and seamlessly integrated into the school curriculum and reading activities; however, there is still a critical need for the classroom library. Research conducted by Richard Allington (2006) showed that higher achieving schools had more books in classroom library collections; students read more frequently in classrooms with a larger collection of books; and classrooms with a larger collection of books usually had students reading books they could read successfully. Classroom libraries provide teachers with an opportunity for extending learning opportunities for all students, even those students who may be struggling, unmotivated or disinterested (Allington & Gabriel, 2012; Dreher, 2003; Routman, 2003; Williams, 2016).

Setting up a classroom for the first year of teaching can be a daunting endeavor. Teachers are faced with a whirlwind of work. Setting up a classroom library can seem like an added burden so it often takes a back seat; however, the benefits far outweigh the challenges. According to Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, and Bryan (2016), "Every classroom needs its own library" (p. 237). Some teachers may think a classroom library is not necessary because there is a school library. One library does not take the place of the other, nor are they independent of each other; they complement each other when the school librarian helps to build a positive pathway between the school library and the new teacher's classroom library.

Preservice teachers need to know that, once in practice, they do not have to face the challenge of implementing a classroom library alone. A wealth of support is available for new teachers to set up their classroom libraries - the school librarian. The librarian can provide support, additional resources, and practical advice as they work together to design and maintain the new teacher's classroom library. The

school librarian is an instructional partner who has the expertise to help teachers develop a classroom library that motivates children, meets curriculum standards, and transforms classroom experiences. Morrow and Weinstein (1982) found that a “well-designed classroom library corner significantly increased the number of kindergarten children who chose to participate in reading activities during free play period” (as cited in Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993). Time invested working with the school librarian in the beginning of the year to set up a dynamic classroom library will pay great dividends throughout the year.

### **The Study**

Recent graduates from a librarian certification program submitted feedback during a routine assessment of their first year in practice. Although results were positive, an unexpected finding about elementary classroom libraries was discovered. The librarians reported limited classroom libraries in their school districts and that some teachers seemed unaware of the impact a classroom library could have on their students. The librarians also reported that many teachers were surprised by the librarian’s offer to support their teaching and implementation of a dynamic classroom library.

Inspired by these findings, the authors sought to verify whether classroom libraries are still relevant to elementary classrooms. A review of the literature validated that classroom libraries are still essential. The literature also showed that teacher-librarian collaborations produce powerful results with practical solutions and support for new teachers.

### **Method**

A qualitative survey of school library program graduates after their first year in practice explored their experiences and perceptions of ways they can or did collaborate with classroom teachers. A qualitative survey of preservice teachers explored their awareness and knowledge of classroom libraries and how school librarians can support them in establishing and maintaining a classroom library.

### **Participants**

The participants included one hundred preservice teachers enrolled in a children’s literature class, and 20 graduates of the school library program. The population was representative of candidates enrolled in the education programs, which included 89% females and 10% males, ranging in age from 20-54. There were approximately 53% white, 35% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 4% two or more races, and 3% Black participants. Teacher certification areas reported were EC-6 (66%), 4th-8th (9%), 8th-12th (16%), and

9% non-education majors. Content areas included bilingual, ESL, math, science, social studies, language arts, special education, art, and early childhood.

### **Instrumentation**

School library graduates and preservice teachers responded to surveys and discussion forums regarding classroom libraries and teacher-librarian collaboration. School library program graduates responded to a routine assessment survey of their first year in practice. Preservice teachers responded to discussion forums and an informal survey specifically assessing their awareness of classroom libraries and the library's impact on student achievement and engagement in reading, awareness that school librarians can help teachers establish a classroom library, and that teachers can collaborate with school librarians to get help in keeping their classroom library current and relevant.

### **Data Collection**

Newly practicing graduates of the school library program responded to questions about teacher-librarian collaboration. One open-ended question, the focus of this work, asked them to reflect upon their collaborative experiences with teachers pertaining to classroom libraries. The results fell into the following three categories.

**Fully developed classroom library with help from the librarian.** One of the twenty school librarians reported that two teachers at her school had asked for her help in providing suggestions for book titles to add to their classroom libraries. In particular, they both wanted informational books to support their curriculum, and books that would interest several of their boys who were struggling readers.

**Fully developed classroom library with no help from the librarian.** Four of the twenty school librarians reported that all teachers in their schools had well-developed classroom libraries that were maintained by the teacher. The school librarian had provided no assistance in their implementation or in its continued development.

**Limited classroom library with no help from the librarian.** Fifteen of the twenty school librarians reported the teachers in their schools had limited classroom libraries. Essentially, this meant the classroom libraries consisted of several baskets or shelves of fiction books for students to read when they had finished all their work assignments.

Preservice teachers responded to questions about classroom libraries and teacher-librarian collaboration. Specifically, they were asked about their awareness of classroom libraries, the impact of

classroom libraries on student achievement and engagement in reading, the school librarian's help in developing a classroom library, and collaborating with the school librarian to keep their classroom library current and relevant. The results were as follows:

1. Classroom libraries: Fifty-two percent of the preservice teachers were not aware that classrooms have libraries.
2. The impact of classroom libraries on student achievement: Seventy-one percent of preservice teachers were not aware of the impact of classroom libraries on student achievement and reading habits and attitudes.
3. The school librarian's help in developing a classroom library: Seventy-six percent of the preservice teachers were not aware that the school librarian could help them in developing a classroom library.
4. Collaborating with the school librarian to keep classroom library current and relevant: Eighty percent of the preservice teachers were not aware that the school librarian could collaborate with teachers to keep their classroom library current and relevant.

## Results

**School librarians.** Five school librarians reported teachers having fully developed classroom libraries. Only one of the five reported a couple of instances where teachers had asked for her help in providing suggestions for book titles to add to their classroom libraries. Fifteen of the school librarians reported limited classroom libraries in their schools. Limited classroom libraries consisted of a few baskets or shelves of nonfiction titles. The librarians reported that some teachers seemed unaware of the impact a classroom library can have on their students. The librarians also reported that many teachers were surprised by the librarian's offer to support their teaching and implementation of a dynamic classroom library.

**Preservice teachers.** Just over half (52%) of the responses indicated that preservice teachers were not aware of the importance of a classroom library, though many thought they were not needed if students had access to a school library. Nearly three-fourths (71%) of the preservice teachers were not aware of the impact a classroom library can have on student achievement and reading engagement. Three-fourths (76%) were also not aware that school librarians could help teachers in developing a classroom library and four-fifths (80%) were not aware the school librarian could collaborate with teachers to keep classroom libraries current and relevant.

Several questions arose for the authors from the preservice teacher responses. Did the presence of classroom libraries in their own previous experiences influence their current opinion of the value of a

classroom library? Will their current opinion influence the kind of classroom library they will have in their future classroom? Are preservice teachers receiving the necessary instruction to design, promote and maintain an effective library? Are preservice teachers informed of the value of collaborating with the school librarian?

### **Designing the Classroom Library**

“Students in classrooms with well-designed classroom libraries interact more with books, spend more time reading, demonstrate more positive attitudes toward reading, and exhibit higher levels of reading achievement” (National Assessment of Educational Progress Report, 2002, as cited in Scholastic, n.d.). Together the teacher and librarian can fill the library with diverse and interesting books that are rich with potential for teaching and learning. As soon as children enter the classroom, they will know that reading is valued because the classroom library is in a prominent location, easily accessible to all students. The shelves are filled with a wide range of approximately two to three hundred books that meet the needs of the learners. The librarian can help to expedite this process of selecting books by introducing teachers to online resources to locate book titles that align with the teacher’s curricular needs (Freeman, 2014). The librarian can also help locate other sources for books.

The presence of trade books in a classroom speaks volumes about their central place in the learning process. Simply by being there, shelves of real books...give evidence of the teacher’s commitment to lifelong learning. If a teacher talks about the importance of reading but only a few books are visible, the message rings hollow to young ears. (Tunnell et al. 2016, p. 237)

According to Miller and Kelley (2014), a goal is about 200-300 books; however, speaking practically, it is certainly more likely that a new teacher may have a small number of books. The collection can begin small and grow over time. A well-balanced selection includes diverse, high-interest books in a variety of genres and topics that meet students’ needs and interests.

The classroom library also showcases children’s writings and author/illustrator displays. A bulletin board for anchor charts and book reviews written by teachers, parents, and children are highly motivating displays that encourage readers. Other resources and materials readers may need in the library include bookmarks, clipboards, sticky-notes and wish lists. Some children may also benefit from colored overlays and audiobooks. In a study of fourth graders, conducted by Pachtman and Wilson (2006), the authors found that having a classroom library which provided access to a lot of books was the single most important factor influencing the students’ reading practices.

When bookshelves or floor space are limited, teachers have shown tremendous creativity. For example, books can be placed in labeled baskets or crates, on counter tops, on wall-mounted rain gutters, or even on the floor. Regardless of the containers, books need to be labeled and arranged in a way that attracts children's attention. Book covers facing outward are far more likely to pique children's interest (Catapano, Fleming, Elias, 2009).

### **Maintaining and Promoting the Classroom Library**

Preservice teachers need to understand the importance of students having choices in the books they read, as well as opportunities to browse, explore and try out a wide variety of books. Actual reading from books, rather than merely completing activities pertaining to books, produces skill building in reading in all areas of the curriculum. Proficient readers who are more skilled in self-selecting books are more likely to choose books they can successfully read (Kragler, 2000). Readers who are successful in reading the books they choose are more motivated to read, leading to extra reading practice that expedites their reading progress (Mohr, 2006). "When students read books of their own choosing, they are likely to be more motivated, independent readers" (p. 82).

A well-balanced collection stays fluid and dynamic as books rotate from the school library to the classroom library, providing readers with unlimited choices of books they can relate to and successfully read. Through periodic interest surveys, teachers can keep motivation high by providing books on topics of specific interests to the students. According to the findings of a study conducted by Fractor et al. (1993), access to a well-designed classroom library promotes voluntary reading and combats aliteracy - choosing not to read. Voluntarily reading for pleasure strengthens positive reading habits through having time to read and making their own choices (Hall, Hedrick, & Williams, 2014). Many agree that these are the facets of motivation. A new teacher may question where she will find time for independent reading in a classroom library, but the real question should be how she will ensure students have time to read for pleasure.

"Across the grade levels, teachers should provide daily opportunities for leisure reading" (International Reading Association, 2014, p. 2). The report also suggests that "...daily engagement with a balanced range of text genres and modes of texts in both nonfiction and fiction texts, has the potential to motivate" (International Reading Association, 2014, p. 3). When given opportunities to browse, use, and manage the classroom library, the library becomes a place where students take ownership of their library space and experience authentic reading opportunities. When books are in the hands and hearts of children, reading is transformed into a purposeful, enjoyable way for students to practice what they are learning. Surrounded with a wealth of books and time to read in a pleasant atmosphere, children make

memories that transfer far beyond the classroom. When children associate reading at school with pleasure and success, they are far more likely to see themselves as competent readers and continue reading. Giving students these opportunities will help them develop the ability to choose appropriate texts for themselves. This, in turn, will promote the likelihood that students will choose to read outside of class. “Young people who view reading as enjoyable and read outside of class on a daily basis are much more likely to experience success as readers” (International Reading Association, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, struggling readers who read outside of school make reading gains in reading achievement (Allington, 2009; Kamil, 2008).

Teachers benefit from working with the school librarian to keep the classroom library aligned with curriculum, as well as engaging and motivating for students. Once a trusting collaboration is established, teachers, librarians, and students can maintain a routine that keeps classroom collections fluid and relevant. Frequent brief communication with the librarian for assistance will help maintain and promote the classroom library. This two-way communication in this reciprocal relationship also informs the school librarian of the ever-changing needs of teachers and students. Some strategies for maintaining and promoting the classroom library include:

- Brief productive communiqué between the teacher, librarian, and students
- Rotating books from the school library based on curricular needs and students’ interests
- Showcasing informational texts aligned to and rotating with curriculum
- Giving book talks and suggesting related books to check out from the school library
- Creating author/illustrator displays showcasing specific books
- Introducing the latest popular titles and award winning books
- Reader’s logs to set reading goals and track student progress
- Building text sets by pairing fiction and nonfiction
- Provide titles that offer students a choice and entice students to read for pleasure.

These strategies for promoting the classroom library enables teachers new to practice to be more effective teachers in generating students’ interests in reading (Allington, 2015; Catapano, et al., 2009, Ivey & Johnston, 2013).

### **Other Sources for Books**

Librarians and teachers can also work together to find other sources for providing books for the classroom library. Grant writing, in collaboration with the school librarian, has been shown to be fruitful in garnering funding for trade books for the classroom library. These include donations from parents, PTAs, PTOs, and other community partners. For example, the teacher can ask community partners for



donations during special events, such as Read Across America, Poem in Your Pocket Day, and National Readathon Day. Parents and grandparents may also wish to donate books to the classroom library for birthdays and holidays. Furthermore, the teacher can guide students in writing classroom-published books to donate to the school library, which also serves to continue the connection between the school library and the classroom library.

### **The Far-Reaching Impact of the Classroom Library**

Overall, the potential impact of the classroom library is immeasurable. When the teacher and librarian collaborate to design, maintain, and promote the classroom library, children gain many benefits. Benefits for learners and teachers are presented below.

#### **Benefits for Learners**

Children in classrooms with libraries read 50 to 60% more than do children in classrooms without libraries (Morrow, 2003). Long-term, these benefits transfer into children's personal and social lives, as well as academic knowledge and skills. Time spent reading independently pays rich dividends and there is great return in many other areas of the curriculum. As a result, frequent use of the classroom library provides a foundation to support independent reading that increases children's knowledge and perspectives, and exponentially expands writing skills, critical thinking, and self-confidence (Miller & Kelley, 2014).

Students in classrooms with access to books, magazines, and other materials have better attitudes toward reading, reading achievement, and comprehension (Moss & Young, 2010). Having quick and easy access to books provides children with the opportunities for community conversations about books (Miller & Kelley, 2014). A classroom library well-used by a community of readers and learners give children a sense of belonging and opportunities for purposeful social interaction with lots of talk about books. The books contained within a classroom library have the potential to broaden children's global view and introduce them to new cultures.

#### **Benefits for Teachers**

Classroom libraries not only provide potential for a wealth of gained content knowledge for students, but can also provide teachers with information about students' reading habits, skills, and abilities. Observations of students using the classroom library help teachers identify "fake readers" (Miller & Kelley, 2014, p. 26). Then teachers can intercede by offering students, without judgment, strategies and opportunities for transforming students into real readers (Miller & Kelley, 2014).

Reading logs can document students' evidence of reading. Teachers can use this information in one-on-one discussions to analyze student knowledge and comprehension of their reading. This information will enable teachers to guide students in future book choices (Miller & Kelley, 2014). Time invested in setting expectations for the classroom library and instructing students in effective ways for using and managing the library will strengthen students' ownership of the classroom library. This can lead to students' improving their leadership and management skills which, in turn, can build community in the classroom and lead to a classroom which runs more smoothly throughout the year (Iqbal, Rauf, Zeb, Rehman, Khan, Rashid, & Farman, 2012; Kwok, 2016). Giving students quick and easy access to books provides them the opportunity to become independent learners and better readers. Students' improved reading comprehension may be reflected in their scores on high-stakes testing.

Teachers will also benefit from collaboration with the librarian. The school librarian is an expert who can connect teachers with quality literature for their students, as well as the latest most popular books, books that address particular topics, and books that best support specific student learning needs. The librarian can also help teachers find books and other resources through their work with community partners and grant writing. The teacher-librarian partnership is invaluable when making an impact with classroom libraries.

### **Conclusions**

While it may be assumed that new teachers graduate with the knowledge of the importance of classroom libraries and teacher-librarian collaboration, the results of this study indicate otherwise. Informal surveys and discussion forum responses clearly indicated a pressing need for preservice teachers to learn about the tremendous impact of classroom libraries and how to design, promote and manage them. Another important finding showed that preservice teachers are often unaware of the value of collaborating with librarians to raise student achievement and attitudes toward reading.

As educators who prepare future teachers, we must heed the call to advocate for classroom libraries and teacher/librarian collaboration. Teacher educators must equip preservice teachers with knowledge of the tremendous impact classroom libraries can have on children and the effectiveness of authentic teaching. The authors invite teacher educators to consider whether their preservice teachers graduate with an awareness of the value of teacher-librarian collaboration, and how school librarians can support teachers' efforts to design, promote, and maintain classroom libraries. School librarian certification programs must also ensure that their graduates are trained in ways to successfully and congenially partner with classroom teachers to implement effective classroom libraries that impact

students' reading success. The potential for student and teacher success is far too great to neglect this call to action.

The need for future research is evident. This work is the beginning of the authors' formal research to assess preservice teachers' knowledge about classroom libraries and teacher-librarian collaboration and its alignment with current best practices. Specific strategies will be implemented to expand preservice teachers' skills relevant to classroom libraries and teacher-librarian collaboration before they move into their own classrooms. Books provide a means to an end to which we all strive - lifelong readers and learners. Teachers and librarians who collaborate to provide students with books, both in the school library and in the classroom library, form a strong partnership in transforming students' reading habits and attitudes. A well-worn path between the school library and the classroom library can help students read more, read more successfully, read for a lifetime, and read beyond the walls of the school.

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