The Power of Classroom Libraries and Pre-service Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores how critical classroom libraries are for student success. Research indicates that students who have access to classroom libraries read more and their reading achievement improves. This study investigates the picture-book genre preferences of pre-service teachers and the implications for the books and genres that scored both high and low on the survey. In addition, this study highlights the plight of students who reside in book desserts and do not have abundant opportunities to obtain books outside of the school community.

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Introduction

Classroom libraries are important and children read 50 percent to 60 percent more in classrooms with libraries than those without them (Morrow, 2003). Books are often the first invitation students receive to begin their reading journey. By providing access to a rich and varied classroom library, teachers promote reading and reading ability is fundamental to future success. Books engage students, deepen their understanding and prepare them for the future. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 65% of today's grade school kids will end up at a job that hasn't been invented yet (U.S. Department of Labor, 2015). However, only 35 percent of 4th graders are reading at or above a proficient level, according to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Routman (2014) contends that access to an abundance of books within the classroom results in increased motivation and increased reading achievement.

Classroom Libraries are Crucial

According to Allington and McGill-Frazen (2013) historically, high-needs students are less likely to read because they tend not to own any books and they live in neighborhoods where there are few, if any, places to purchase books. These children live in neighborhoods best described as book deserts. In addition, these students rely primarily on schools as sources for the books they read. Unfortunately, too many high-poverty schools have small libraries, and there are too many classrooms that have no classroom library for students to select books to read. Too many high-poverty schools ban library books (and textbooks) from leaving the building (fear of loss of the

books). However, even with fewer books in their schools and more restrictive book-lending policies, these students do get most the books they read from the school they attend. By offering a wide range of books from which to choose, classroom libraries can help students continue on their reading path.

The Power of Reading

When children get to choose books and explore personal interests, they will enjoy reading and spend more time doing so. A well-stocked classroom library offers students the support they need to become lifelong readers. Teachers are profound influencers who shape the lives of the children they teach. While there's no definitive answer to what makes a perfect classroom library, teachers need to build well-rounded, balanced book collections across content areas, genres, and diverse reading levels.

Study/Focus

This study focused on the responses that 20 pre-service teachers who attended a small university in the Midwest provided when they compiled a multi-media project detailing their ten favorite children's picture books. Each book title selected by a pre-service teacher represented a vote for the corresponding genre. A total of 200 votes were possible. Results are shown in Table 1. Additionally, a detailed list and definitions of all genres are provided. Furthermore, this study addressed the significance of the books and genres that received the most and the least amount of votes.

Selected Titles

The results revealed the following preferences of pre-service teachers regarding picture-books and genres (in alphabetical order):

- Alphabet or Numeracy books: Books that explore the letters of the alphabet or numbers and counting. This type of text received 9/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Auto/biographies: An account of a person's life or part of a life history. This type of text received 1/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Easy Readers: Books featuring simple words and sentence patterns. This type of text received 7/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Fictional books featuring people or animals (fantasy): Make-believe story settings, starring people or animals (as the main characters) with events that could not happen. This type of text received 109/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Historical-Contemporary fiction: Set in the recent or distant past, could have happened, story reconstructs events of past age, things that could have or did occur. This type of text received 2/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Informational books: Facts about the real world. This type of text received 13/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Multicultural/Diverse Books: Literature that fosters an awareness and

understanding of people. This type of text received 20/200 votes from pre-service teachers.

- Poetry: Condensed language, imagery, expression of imaginative thoughts perceptions. This type of text received 0/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Realistic fiction: "What if" stories, illusion of reality; characters seem real. This type of text received 26/200 votes from pre-service teachers.
- Rhyming, Nursery Rhymes, Repetitive Text, Riddle Books: Oral and literary heritage of childhood – some with no known author. This type of text received 13/200 votes from pre-service teachers.

There was a strong selection of literature that fell into the following three categories: fictional books starring people or animals as the main characters, realistic fiction, and multicultural/diverse books. Conversely, there was a limited selection of historical-contemporary fiction, and autobiographies. Furthermore, poetry did not receive any votes from pre-service teachers. See table 1.

Implications

- The survey instrument revealed that pre-service teachers indicated a solid preference for fictional books (fantasy) featuring people or animals. This genre of books received an overwhelming total of 109/200 votes. Wooten & Cullinan (2015) stated "children's books are not written in a vacuum but rather serve as instruments for students to expand into other books, texts, and experiences, whetting their appetites for more" (p. xvii). Moreover, according to Chatton (2004) many adults believe that students should read only what adults consider quality literature; yet, an adult's interests often differ from a child's. Pre-service teachers may be tempted to stock their classroom libraries with books of genres that they enjoy reading. However, a classroom library should include books that may not be deemed high-quality by adults but are popular with students. In sum, if our students are to embrace their reading lives, they need easy access to an abundance of books across a wide range of genre, theme, and topics (Gallagher, 2009).
- To engage students and provide access to books students will enjoy and want to read, pre-service teachers should discover their students' attitudes about reading and the types of books they like. Pre-service teachers could use observations, interviews and attitude/interest inventories to discover their students' literary profile. The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey, also known as the Garfield test, is an example of a formal interest inventory that pre-service teachers could use to gather additional information about their students. Guthrie & Humenick (2004) noted that the self-selection of texts and student access to a classroom library of wonderful books is a potentially powerful factor in reading development.

- The feedback further implies that there is a strong need to address the importance of informational text with pre-service teachers. Informational books only received 13/200 votes from pre-service teachers. Due to the CCSS, students at all grade levels are expected to read and comprehend a higher volume of informational texts. Daniels (2002) stressed an added urgency to shift text exploration from solely fiction to informational text in order to rectify the enormous emphasis on fiction prevalent in today's classrooms and because students are expected to engage more often with nonfiction. Although, absent from the survey, educators must shine a spotlight on the role of ebooks, tablets, and ereaders in the classroom library. These new technologies have shaped how students view, read and interact with literature.
- Overall, the results indicate that pre-service teachers "must make sure that the books available in the classroom library meet the diverse needs and interests of all students in the classroom, including those from various socioeconomic backgrounds, religions, genders, and exceptionalities and struggling/reluctant readers, which may include boys" (Dobler, Johnson, & Wolsey, 2013, p. 152).

Conclusion(s)

Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) concluded that children's reading achievement, comprehension, and attitude toward reading improve when their classrooms are filled with books. Access to books and providing students with choices in what they read improves students' reading motivation, engagement, and success. Classroom libraries give students the continuous access they need, allowing them to choose the books that interest them most. Once students become interested in reading, classroom libraries are essential in keeping that interest alive.

1.	Fictional books (fantasy) featuring people or animals	109
2.	Realistic fiction	26
3.	Multicultural/Diverse books	20
4.	Informational books	13
5.	Rhyming, Nursery Rhymes, Repetitive Text, Riddle books	13
6.	Alphabet and Numeracy books	9
7.	Easy readers	7
8.	Historical-Contemporary fiction	2
9.	Auto/biographies	1
10.	Poetry	0

Table 1: Top 10 Genre Preferences of Pre-service Teachers

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