



Classroom Libraries: Book Access, Reader Agency, Identity, and Choice

Independent reading programs that invite reading choice and promote reading pleasure give rise to kids who not only read, but—more importantly—want to read.



One to Know: Flood Your Classroom With Books!

The best antidote for ho-hum readers? Access to books they love—lots and lots of books in their classrooms, across genre, topic, format, and reading level—and time in which to read. Think classroom library ... and book flood! Researchers Worthy and Roser (2010) detail the ways in which they flooded a fifth grade classroom with books in an under-resourced school. They spent a year monitoring and documenting the students' involvement with their new expansive classroom library, including the opportunities it provided for sustained reading both in school and at home. The results are impressive: before the "book flood," only 27% of the students had passed the state achievement test as fourth graders; after the book flood, all but one student passed the test, and he missed by just one point (p. 250). As high school teacher Kelly Gallagher notes, "Students need to be surrounded by interesting books daily, not just on those occasional days when the teacher takes them to the library."

Academic Success

Access to books and academic success go hand-in-hand. Establishing robust classroom libraries is especially important in communities facing the challenges of poverty, in which students may not have access to books in their homes.

Students in classrooms with effective, well-designed classroom libraries:

- interact more with books.
- spend more time reading.
- demonstrate more positive attitudes toward reading.
- exhibit higher levels of reading achievement.

(Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress Report, 2005)



The research is clear: access to books counts. When children live in classrooms with libraries, they read 50–60% more than children who don't (Morrow, 2009; Kim, 2009). The number of books is also important. As reported in Miller and Moss (2013), Guthrie, et al., (2012) surveyed 545 teachers in 32 Maryland schools to assess which schools were making the strongest gains in reading achievement. No surprise: “An abundance of trade books in classrooms predicted gains on statewide reading, writing, and science tests” (p. 28).

Books in the classroom just like books in the home—create a “culture of reading”—which promotes time to read and talk about books. And that’s hugely significant because independent reading in school is the best predictor of academic success. As reported in a study of 1,285 first and second graders and their 107 teachers, Foorman, et al. (2006) documented 20 different kinds of instruction that focused on oral language, grammar, vocabulary, letter recognition, word work, and reading. They used this data to predict students’ end-of-year reading achievement scores. The only variable that explained gains on the post-test was time spent on actual reading; time spent on other factors like phonemic awareness, word, or alphabetic instruction failed to predict improved achievement.

More recently, Krashen, et al. (2021) found similar gains from access to books and time in which to read for pleasure. Every five years, the [Progress in International Reading Literacy Study](#) (PIRLS) examination is given to 10-year-olds in more than 45 countries in the language of the country. They examined the test data from 2006, 2011, and 2016 in an attempt to isolate the variables that impact reading achievement. The summation of their findings is as follows:

“The clear winner in boosting reading achievement appears to be providing access to books, which in turn helps create a pleasure reading habit, which in turn results in better scores on tests such as the PIRLS, and in turn contributes to school and life success.”

What to Do: Promote Reader Agency, Identity, and Choice—and Provide Time to Read

The goal of course is to help students find the books they love and will actually read. Harvey, Ward, Hoddinott, and Carroll (2021) refer to “watershed reading experience,” which unleash “a continuous and sustained flow of engaged reading.” For many children, series books provide their first sustained “watershed” reading experiences in which they finish one book in the series and can’t bear to wait a single day to start on the next book in the series. Harvey, et al cite poet Paul Janeczko’s essay “The Hardy Boys Made Me Do It,” in which he describes “the life-altering discovery of his first Hardy Boys mystery at a flea market:”

“When I read the opening pages of that novel, I knew I was onto something. It was as if my teachers had been teaching me to read by looking through the wrong end of the telescope. But when I read my first Hardy Boys book, it was as if Frank and Joe had turned the telescope around and said, ‘Here, chum. Try it this way.’ I did. And wow!”

In their book, *From Striving to Thriving: How to Grow Confident, Capable Readers* (2017), Harvey and Ward note the critical importance of deeply engaged reading: “Watershed reading experiences are the catalysts that transform many readers from striving to thriving.” And watershed reading experiences are most likely to happen when students are invited to choose the books themselves. That’s the great power and joy of both [Bookelicious](#) and access to public, school, and classroom libraries.

As essential aspect of becoming a reader is knowing yourself as a reader—having favorite reading topics, genres, text formats, authors—made possible through wide reading, driven by access to abundant books and personal choice (Miller & Sharp, 2018; Wilhelm and Smith, 2014; Tatum, 2009; Allington and Gabriel, 2012). “The research base on student-selected reading is robust and conclusive. Students read more, understand more, and are more likely to continue reading when they have the opportunity to choose what they read” (Allington and Gabriel, 2012). Indeed, self-selected reading is twice as powerful as teacher-selected reading in developing motivation and comprehension (Guthrie and Humenick, 2004).



More to Know and Do

Our students thrive when they have easy access to an abundance of books across a wide range of genres, themes, and topics. Veteran teacher Kelly Gallagher explains:

“Placing students in a daily book flood zone produces much more reading than occasionally taking them to the library. There is something powerful about surrounding kids with interesting books. I have 2,000 books in my room, and because of this, my students do a lot more reading. Establishing a book flood is probably the single most important thing I have done in my teaching career” (2009, 52–53).

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