

The Importance of the Classroom Library

by Susan B. Neuman

A large, varied, and often-refreshed collection of books in the classroom is a vital ingredient in improving reading performance



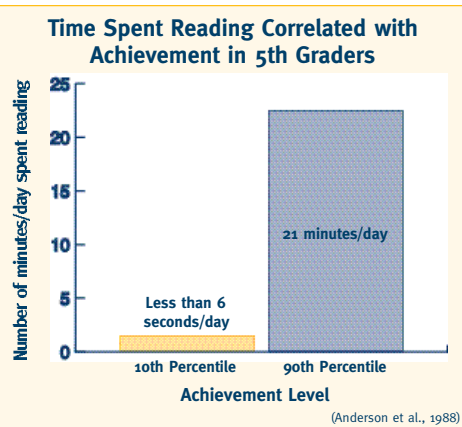
Introduction

Recent studies on literacy confirm what educators have known for years: the more contact children have with books, the better readers they become. Teachers can promote better reading performance by reading to children daily and by having them interact with books through the extensive use of classroom libraries. This paper outlines some of the most recent research on classroom libraries and gives specific ideas on how to apply these important findings in the classroom:

- the benefits of surrounding children with books
- the important role of the classroom library in developing literacy
- characteristics of an effective classroom library
- reading activities to improve literacy

The More Time Children Spend Reading, the Better Readers They Become

For virtually all children, the amount of time spent reading in classrooms consistently accelerates their growth in reading skills (Anderson, 1996; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). One study (Anderson & Nagy, 1992) estimates that children learn an average of 4,000 to 12,000 new vocabulary words each year as a result of book reading. Another study (Anderson et al., 1988) found that the highest achievers in 5th grade classrooms were likely to read over 200 times as many minutes per day (21 minutes) as the lowest achievers (who read for less than one tenth of a minute per day). Such striking findings might be related to the number of “rare” words outside of their current vocabulary that children encounter in reading versus other language activities. For example, Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) report that children’s books have 50% more rare words in them than adult prime-time television or the conversation of college graduates.



Together, these studies provide convincing evidence that the amount of reading is a major factor in growth in literacy.

Unfortunately, however, socioeconomic factors can lead to tremendous disparities in access to books at home (Smith, Constantino, & Krashen, 1996). As a result, the International Reading Association strongly advocates for school library media centers and classroom libraries to provide books for all children.

The Classroom Library Helps Develop Literacy

Recent research emphasizes the importance of the classroom library, particular in children's literacy development. In one large-scale study (Neuman, 1999), classroom libraries with high-quality books were placed in over 350 schools to enhance the language and literacy environment of 18,000 economically disadvantaged children.

In one study, classroom libraries increased reading time by 60%

Findings revealed that with books in close proximity to classroom activity:

- **time spent reading increased by 60%** compared to a control group
- **literacy-related activities more than doubled**, from an average of 4 interactions per hour to 8.5 interactions per hour
- **letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, concepts of print and writing, and narrative**



competence rose 20% more than the control group after a year, followed by continued gains 6 months and 12 months later

Many and Varied Books Make Classroom Libraries Most Effective

Quality classroom libraries are not simply collections of children's trade books located in the back corner of the room. There are certain characteristics and design features that strongly influence whether or not classroom libraries may be used to their full potential to improve children's reading performance.

A Large Supply of Books

In order to attract and hold children's interests, classroom libraries must be stocked with many good books. According to the American Library Association (Hack, Hepler, & Hickman, 1993), classroom libraries should include about 300 titles, single and multiple copies, as part of a permanent collection, with supplements from a well-stocked school library. The International Reading Association recommends that classroom

libraries start with at least 7 books per child and purchase two additional new books per child each year. The Maryland Reading Task Force of the Maryland State Department of Education (1998) recommends each elementary school provide a library media center containing a minimum of 20 titles per student. Each classroom collection should contain a minimum of 500 titles, which could be partially drawn from the library media center.

Optimal Number of Books in a Classroom Library

- 300-600, depending on grade level and number of copies of each title

Number of Books Teachers Should Expect Children to Read During the School Year

- 1st Grade/Picture Books: **100-125**
- 2nd Grade and up/Chapter Books: **50-75**

Fountas & Pinnell (1996)

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) recommend a collection of about 300-600 books, depending on the grade level and number of copies of each title. Their calculations estimate that teachers should expect first-graders to read about 100-125 books during the school year, and older children, who are likely to read longer books, 50-75 books for the year.

A Wide Variety of Books, Replenished Regularly

Classroom libraries need to include a wide variety of books that span a significant range of difficulty. Some of the books should be relatively easy, and some should be challenging for all children. These books may be divided into a “core” collection and a “revolving” collection (Cullinan & Galda, 1994). Just like a public library, the core collection is the permanent collection, available throughout the year. The revolving collection, on the other hand, changes every few weeks, based on the topics to be studied in class, the children’s current interests, and special holidays throughout the year.

Variety of Genres

Children also need to be exposed to a range of language, topics, genres, and perspectives (McGee & Richgels, 1996). They need books that reflect the diverse, multicultural nature of our society, books where they can learn about themselves and others. The literature selection should include:

- **Traditional stories:** Familiar stories that are found in every culture, including fables, folk tales, myths and legends
- **Fantasy:** Stories that contain characters who may have superhuman powers that spark children’s imaginations
- **Realistic fiction:** Stories with characters, settings and events that could plausibly happen in true life
- **Historical fiction:** Stories set in the past, accurately reflecting the time period in which they occur
- **Biographies and autobiographies:** Books about the lives of everyday or famous people
- **Information:** Books that provide realistic, accurate and authentic information



High-Quality Books

To spark children's interest and enthusiasm about reading, books must catch children's attention, captivate their imaginations, and make them want to return to their pages again and again. Only high-quality books will achieve these goals (Neuman, 1999). Rather than some old tattered books from garage sales, books need to look physically attractive, with fresh covers and interesting, bright illustrations. Brand-new books should be added to replenish the classroom library on a regular basis.

An Attractive Setting

Children are more likely to visit classroom libraries and actively participate in them when they are physically attractive. A number of design features have been identified (Morrow & Weinstein, 1986; Neuman & Roskos, 1992):

- **Partitions:** Bookshelves or other barriers on at least two sides help to set the library apart, giving children a sense of privacy and providing a quiet, cozy setting for reading
- **Ample space:** There should be room to accommodate about 4 or 5 children at a time
- **Comfortable furnishings:** Pillows, carpeting, bean bag chairs, plants, and flowers all help to create a comfortable atmosphere for reading
- **Open-faced and traditional bookshelves:** Open-faced bookshelves display the covers of the books, and naturally attract children to the library; traditional bookshelves, carts, and baskets hold multiple copies of books for children to read to each other
- **Literacy displays and props:** Book posters from the public library, an author's display, message center (for favorite reviews of books), listening corner, puppets, and flannel

board encourage children to use the library in many different ways, for quiet reflection and reading, reenactments of stories, and conveying messages to one another

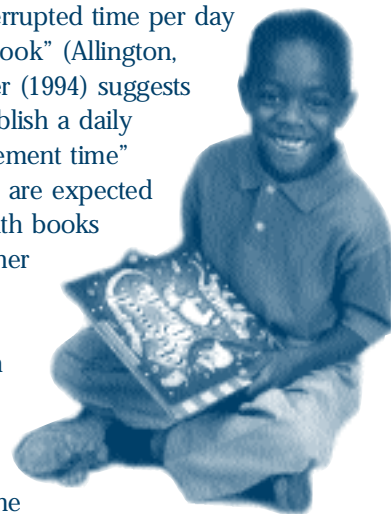
Characteristics of a Literacy-Building Classroom Library

- 300-600 books
- Wide range of reading difficulty
- Permanent "core" collection and regularly replenished "revolving" collection
- Variety of genres
- New books with appealing covers
- Attractive, inviting setting

Regular Reading Improves Literacy and Comprehension

Time for Reading

Children need time to read independently every day. Most authorities recommend about 20 minutes of uninterrupted time per day to "get lost in a book" (Allington, et al., 1996). Elster (1994) suggests that teachers establish a daily "sustained engagement time" when all children are expected to be engaged with books in whatever manner most comfortable to them, whether browsing through books, looking at pictures, or reading the library books alone or with their classmates.



During independent reading time, reluctant readers may be more likely to select a book if teachers highlight particular books during daily read-aloud sessions, or read favorite books at least three times prior to placing them in the classroom library (Martinez & Teale, 1988). Neuman and Soundy (1991) found that storybook partnerships — reading books with buddies — provided a special enticement for sustained reading time and conversations around books.

Conversations About Books

To foster a love of books, children need opportunities to talk about them. Studies suggest that informal conversations around books, such as book talks or book chats, enhance children's motivation to read. Wells and Chang-Wells (1992), found that children develop more complex understandings of stories by talking about their books with others. During book chats, children tell about an interesting event or fact in their book, information about the author, and why others might like to read it in 5-to-10 minute conversations before the whole group. In the course of retelling, children develop new knowledge and understandings, as well as gains in comprehension.

In Conclusion

Research confirms what has often been written:

Children learn to read by reading.

Teachers can promote children's involvement with reading by reading to them daily and by having them interact with books through the extensive use of classroom libraries. With hundreds of good books to read and time to read them, children will get on the right road to reading achievement.



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