

The Craft of Constructing a Classroom Library: Student Involvement in Book Title Selection

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Research Questions

If I ask 3-5th grade teachers working in large urban school districts about their priorities in student involvement of text selection for their classroom libraries, in what ways, if any, could that information inform student agency in the classroom library selection processes?

If I ask 3-5th grade teachers working in large urban school districts about their barriers in student involvement of text selection for their classroom libraries, in what ways, if any, could that information inform student agency in the classroom library selection processes?

Abstract

This mixed methods pilot study examined factors influencing student involvement in book title selection for the classroom library. Data were collected via an electronic survey questionnaire. Frequency counts provided context for themes found in open-ended responses. Results suggest personal interests of students is a significant factor influencing student involvement. Keywords: classroom library, reading material selection, elementary education, student participation

Introduction

“Intent is important but impact matters more.”
--Rachel Hope

A theme evident across case studies presented in Gorski and Pothini’s Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education (2018) was the intent of educators compared to the impact delivered. In each case, the educator desired to grow, develop, evolve, engage, or instruct in meaningful ways; however, the results were one or more groups being marginalized in some way. This can be discussed in-depth around one case study “I’m Not Black” (Gorski and Pothini, 2018, p. 93-95), where the intent of the educator was to create relationships between students, while the actual impact was a devolution in relationships. Ultimately, some harm was created even with the best of intentions to do good.

This theme is mirrored in my own experience as a provider to educators of children’s literature and classroom libraries. Even as teachers report student interest and student representation as critical factors in selecting titles for the classroom library, student voice and agency is missing (Lao, 2005; Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, and Parkhill, 2012; Heron-Hruby, Trent, & Stiles, 2016). The primary method used by teachers to determine interest and representation of their students is observation (Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, and Parkhill, 2012; Heron-Hruby, Trent, and Stiles, 2016; Nash, Panther, & Elson, 2019).

Risks in this process include bias, as teachers make assumptions that may be based on their own experience or personal interests for what students may find interesting or relevant. The intent is to inspire, captivate, and motivate their students to read by building rich bookshelves, however the impact could be creating more disconnect between their students and the titles on the shelf.

Contact and References

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Methodology

A purposeful sampling of general education teachers of grades three, four, or five in public, urban school districts were invited to complete the survey questionnaire about their priorities and barriers in involving students in the classroom library selection process. Responses were comprised of both quantitative and qualitative data.

The action began with deploying the survey questionnaire developed by this researcher, in which questions were designed to reveal values, needs, priorities and barriers expressed by teachers around student involvement in book title selection for the classroom library. Responses were collected over approximately five weeks between the start of a traditional fall break and the end of a traditional winter break.

Responses to the survey questionnaire was comprised of both quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative items required open-ended responses, in which the participant input their response into a text field. Quantitative items required single choice response, multiple choice response or ranking items in order of priority. The data were entered and saved into an electronic spreadsheet for summarizing and analysis. Participants were categorized by years of classroom teaching experience, and frequency counts were used to report on the reading habits of participants, such as frequency of self-selected reading and primary motivation for reading. Additionally, frequency counts were employed to report on the most significant objectives of titles in the classroom library, the primary influence of student involvement in book title selection, and the most significant barrier to student involvement in book title selection. Coded themes around barriers of student involvement in book title selection, and methods of student involvement emerged from multiple readings and segmenting of data from open-ended responses.

Findings

The results indicate that while the participants value student interest with the intent to inspire voluntary, recreational reading, they also perceive individual student interest as a barrier since it is financially challenging to cater to individual student needs in reading.

Additionally, student interest can be difficult to navigate when students lack the experience to understand and articulate their own reading interests.

Finally, both the literature and pilot study results indicate that methods of student involvement are limited to observing students and surveying students, suggesting that participants may need support in effectively engaging and empowering students in book title selection for the classroom library.

Quantitative Results

Survey Item	Response with Highest Frequency Count
How often do you read for pleasure/of your own choosing?	Everyday
What motivates you to read?	Enjoyment
Most important objective of the titles in your classroom library?	Encourage voluntary, recreation reading
Most important influence on student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Personal interests of the students
Methods used to involve students in title selection for the classroom library?	Survey students Observing students
Most important barrier to student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Personal interests of students

Survey Item	Response with Highest Frequency Count
How often do you read for pleasure/of your own choosing?	Everyday
What motivates you to read?	Enjoyment Desire for information such as current events or professional practices
Most important objective of the titles in your classroom library?	Encourage voluntary, recreation reading
Most important influence on student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Personal interests of the students
Methods used to involve students in title selection for the classroom library?	Survey students Observing students
Most important barrier to student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Reading levels of students

Survey Item	Response with Highest Frequency Count
How often do you read for pleasure/of your own choosing?	Everyday
What motivates you to read?	Relaxation
Most important objective of the titles in your classroom library?	Encourage voluntary, recreation reading Provide choice in self-selected reading material for independent reading Improve reading ability of all students
Most important influence on student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Personal interests of the students
Methods used to involve students in title selection for the classroom library?	Survey students Observing students Assessing students
Most important barrier to student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Personal interests of students

Survey Item	Response with Highest Frequency Count
How often do you read for pleasure/of your own choosing?	Everyday
What motivates you to read?	Enjoyment
Most important objective of the titles in your classroom library?	Encourage voluntary, recreation reading
Most important influence on student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Personal interests of the students
Methods used to involve students in title selection for the classroom library?	Observing students
Most important barrier to student involvement in title selection for the classroom library?	Developmental stage of students Reading levels of students

Qualitative Results

Barriers	Student Influence/Involvement
Reading proficiency	Attend to student interest
Budget or funding constraints	Engage in a reading community
Limited experience or exposure to books	Expect and accept student suggestions for the classroom library