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“Teacher librarians who use restrictive circulation policies of one book at a time inhibit students’ access to books, potentially undermining their reading growth.”

Impact of a Less Restrictive Circulation Policy in an Elementary Library

KRISTEN REINHARDT DOWNES, KARLA STEEGE KRUEGER, AND JOAN BESSMAN TAYLOR

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School communities and educational standards clearly recognize that reading is a foundational skill for all learners.

In light of this, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL, 2010) notes the critical position of teacher librarians to partner with other educators to promote literacy and provide opportunities for library use. Specifically, school libraries are charged with providing “open, non-restricted access to a varied high quality collection of reading materials in multiple formats that reflect academic needs and personal interests” (para. 6). AASL (2011) supports open access through flexible scheduling in the library to give students access to materials throughout the school day. The theory behind this position statement posits that the more students read (in both variety and quantity of text), the better readers they become (Krashen, 2004). Research in support of self-selected reading shows that student access to a school library of at least 500 books is associated with higher reading scores (Krashen, 2011, p. 29). Krashen (2011) makes a compelling argument for providing greater attention and support to libraries: “The obvious practical implication is that if we are serious about encouraging literacy development, we need to be serious about providing access to reading material” and provide more than “lip service to improving libraries” (p. 28). One aspect of providing greater access to reading material is increasing borrowing privileges. The current study examines how a change in library policy to reduce restrictions on borrowing privileges impacts students’ actual borrowing habits and the loss of books.

Teacher librarians who use restrictive circulation policies of one book at a time inhibit students’ access to books, potentially undermining their reading growth. Sadly, the majority of teacher librarians, 71% of respondents in one Iowa survey, allowed kindergarteners to check out only one library book at a time (Johnson & Donham, 2012). Fortunately, 36% of those respondents said they decided to raise

their borrowing limits after the survey. However, national K–12 level data reveal policies that limit students’ access to books. An informal online poll administered by *Library Media Connection* showed that 33% of the teacher librarians who responded said they limited their students to one or two books at a time; an additional 36% limited students to three or four books (“One Question Survey,” 2009). These limitations counter best practices established through research that emphasizes the need for expanded exposure to books in order to support reading growth (AASL, 2010; ALA, 1996; Allington, 2014; Krashen, 2004; Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies suggest that greater access to books is associated with higher student reading achievement. Reading enthusiast Stephen Krashen has tirelessly argued that students need access to a variety of texts in order to become successful readers, highlighting a range of studies showing that students who read more, know more

(Krashen, 2004; Krashen et al., 2012). Ramos and Krashen (1998) studied the impact of expanded library circulation, extended to 10 books a week, for elementary children who lacked adequate access to books at home and were previously permitted only one book per week from their library. Student and parent surveys revealed that providing children with increased access to library books was overwhelmingly a powerful reading incentive.

Providing students access to books is perhaps even more important for young students with low socioeconomic status (SES). Studying factors contributing to the early reading skills of children, Fantuzzi-Chapman (2012) found that the family's SES had a larger impact on early literacy skills than other variables. Additionally, Allington (2014) investigated how reading volume affects fluency and achievement, noting that significant access to books is essential for all students. Keith Curry Lance and others have conducted research with a similar goal to evidence the importance of increased access to library books. Over 20 statewide studies of school library programs have shown that increased access to school library resources was associated with greater student achievement in reading and writing (Gretes, 2013).

Given this predominance of evidence that greater access to books is essential to help students—particularly those with low SES—improve their reading, it follows that the professional role of the teacher librarian in building a collection relevant to the school population and advocating for open access cannot be overlooked. Beard (2009) found that the teacher librarian helped students reading below grade level connect to the library and take

control of their book choices, thereby increasing books read and improving attitudes about reading. Undoubtedly a school library program contributes to early literacy development through reading selection and greater circulation of books. Yet, despite accepted research in support of greater access to books, nearly a third of teacher librarians reported reasons for limiting kindergarten students to fewer books than their older peers, including the belief they are too young to be responsible for multiple books and the fear of losing books (Johnson & Donham, 2012).

METHOD

This urban midwestern private school, which has approximately 450 students in grades K–6, was purposefully selected for this study because the library circulation policy was recently changed. Before the 2013–2014 school year, the policy limited kindergarten and first grade students to only one book per six-day cycle library visit; beginning in 2013–2014, they were allowed four books per visit. Thus, our data represent two years of library circulation activity that took place under the more restrictive policy and two years governed by the less restrictive policy. It is worth noting that students were allowed to exchange their books between their library classes during all four years of the study. Fifty percent of the teacher librarian's work time in the school library (mornings) was spent in a fixed schedule, and the other 50% was assigned as a gifted education teacher (afternoons). One library paraprofessional was assigned to the library in the mornings.

The case study approach (Choemprayong & Wildemuth, 2009) is appro-

priate for this study because it can be used to “facilitate evaluative research” based on a natural setting, and the results may be applied to the improvement of library practice (pp. 52–53). This case study used two guiding questions: (1) Has circulation of books increased at all grade levels since the library circulation policy change? (2) Has the library experienced a higher rate of loss of books since the circulation policy change?

Data sources included circulation records by grade level and a library system report for “lost copies.” Books that were paid for were subtracted from the tallies of lost books for this study, because the library recouped the cost. The teacher librarian, as one of this study's authors, provided access to the circulation data and perspectives on dynamics that might have otherwise gone unexamined.

FINDINGS

Table 1 compares monthly circulation data for two years before (2011–2013) and two years after (2013–2015) the library circulation policy change. Students checked out over 80% more books during the latter two years after the change.

Accordingly, the per-student circulation data by grade level in Table 2 shows a higher average and range of books checked out during 2013–2015 than in the earlier years. Understandably, the most notable difference is at the lowest grade levels, because those students experienced the biggest change in borrowing limits. The library circulation policy during 2011–2013 stipulated different borrowing limits for different grades: kindergarten and first grade could check out

Table 1. K–6 Library circulation before and after the circulation policy change.

Month	Old Policy		New Policy	
	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	2014–2015
August	920	472	451	1,276
September	1,645	1,963	3,674	3,337
October	1,665	2,225	3,880	3,531
November	1,395	1,470	2,475	2,457
December	1,009	1,173	2,510	2,588
January	1,466	1,638	2,144	2,611
February	1,479	1,646	2,297	2,565
March	1,284	1,282	2,346	2,671
April	1,451	2,041	2,831	3,538
May	394	691	1,235	780
Total	12,708	14,601	23,843	25,354
2-year averages	13,655		24,599	

only one book per library visit, second grade could check out two books, third and fourth grade could check out three books, and fifth and sixth grade could

check out four books. The change initiated in fall 2013 set the same borrowing limit of four books at a time for all grades, K–6.

Table 2. Library circulation range and average per student.

Grade	Old Policy range and average per student		New Policy range and average per student	
	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	2014–2015
K	NA*	5–26 (average 18)	42–103 (average 70)	41–76 (average 57)
1	12–28 (average 21)	NA*	25–111 (average 68)	30–109 (average 71)
2	6–49 (average 29)	16–52 (average 32)	27–98 (average 59)	10–125 (average 61)
3	13–53 (average 30)	4–65 (average 34)	24–105 (average 57)	22–111 (average 59)
4	6–69 (average 28)	3–72 (average 31)	0–104 (average 39)	10–108 (average 58)
5	NA*	3–94 (average 27)	5–185 (average 52)	2–116 (average 44)

*Grade-level data, including sixth grade, was no longer available in the automation system.

Table 3 compares the number of books lost per grade level under the old policy (40 books lost) and new policy (62 books lost). Notably, kindergarten, fourth grade, and sixth grade students actually lost fewer books after the borrowing limits had increased. At the same time, third and fifth grade students saw modest increases in the number of books lost under the new circulation policy. The greatest loss of books under the new circulation policy occurred among students in first and second grades. These were the grades experiencing the greatest change in policy from one to two books to four books. Kindergarteners were new to the school, and as such, they entered under the new circulation policy. Therefore, they learned to be responsible for four books from their first week of school. Grades five and six were allowed four books per visit under both the old and new policy, so it seems fitting that there was little change, with a slight increase in books lost among fifth grade and a 50% decrease among sixth grade students.

There were, however, two additional factors that may have influenced the number of lost books: students losing multiple books and a change in the lost book replacement policy. Some students lost multiple books all at one time or at different times throughout the school year. In fact, 28 books were lost by students who lost multiple books across the 4-year span. A stricter book replacement policy also may have influenced the increase in the number of books lost during the latter two years. During the first two years, students were allowed to replace a lost book monetarily or by donating *any* book in its place. Some students donated books from home in place of the

book that was lost, so more books during those two years were “replaced” and no longer included in the lost book total. During the latter two years, the library required that lost books be paid for or replaced with the *same* book title; this more rigorous policy may have impacted the lost book totals.

Undoubtedly, the new library circulation policy supported a sharp increase, with 80% more books checked out, and although there were 55% more books lost overall during the two years of the new library circulation policy (62 books) than there were during the old policy (40 books), the losses were comparably smaller than the circulation increase.

CONCLUSION

It is understood that teacher librarians are responsible for maintaining their collections and that ensuring the return or replacement of materials is part of that responsibility. However, fear of loss of materials should not prevent librarians from attending to their shared goal of getting books into the hands of children to encourage continuous reading.

Less restrictive borrowing policies permitting several books to be borrowed at a time make it easier to both encourage reading and equate to a perception of the library as useful and responsive. Fears related to losses can be

Table 3. Number of books lost before and after the library circulation policy change

Grade	Old Policy		New Policy		Difference Before/After Policy Change
	2011–2012	2012–2013	2013–2014	2014–2015	Increase/Decrease
K	4	5	2	6	-1
1	1	5	11	9	+14
2	3	1	11	5	+12
3	1	2	1	3	+1
4	4	3	4	1	-2
5	2	3	6	0	+1
6	2	4	2	1	-3
Total	17	23	37	25	+22

somewhat alleviated by the fact that the losses that do occur often result from factors less related to one’s circulation policy than to the specific individuals involved. For instance, in this study the same students lost multiple books. Recognition of such patterns can provide opportunities for personal involvement and teachable moments or can open the door for targeted interventions as needed, rather than restricting all students based on the actions of a few.

At the same time, other factors may make the incidents of loss appear more significant than they actually are, such as changes in other library policies that inadvertently affect calculations. Here again, losses in this study were magnified by the fact that missing items not

previously qualifying as losses under the former book replacement policy are now included in the total for lost items.

Based on this study’s findings, teacher librarians are advised to allow lower elementary students to check out the same number of books as upper elementary students. In addition, it is recommended that librarians provide the option to exchange books between scheduled class library visits. Both practices support reading promotion and agree with Krashen (2011): “If we are serious about encouraging literacy development, we need to be serious about providing access to reading material” (p. 28).

Future research is recommended to study impacts from revised circulation policies in additional locations; researchers may also want to track the frequency with which students return to the library to exchange books between class visits to see whether this variable may also change due to students’ perceptions of new access policies.

Less restrictive borrowing policies permitting several books to be borrowed at a time make it easier to both encourage reading and equate to a perception of the library as useful and responsive.

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