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Big Kids Need Books Too: Lessons Learned From Building Classroom Libraries at the Secondary Level

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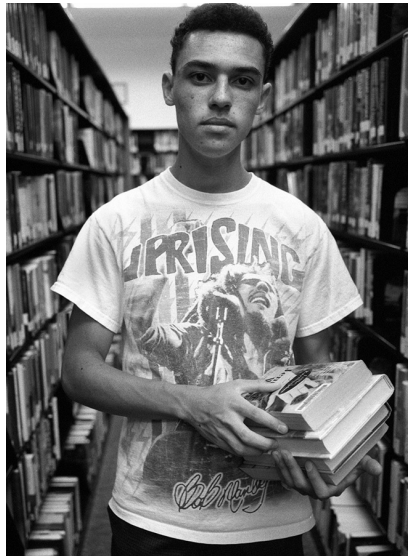
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We, a group of secondary literacy consultants working at an intermediate school district project in Oakland County, Michigan, embarked on the monumental project—and learning opportunity—of building classroom libraries and supporting teachers' effective use of those libraries for 13 schools and 50 classrooms. Each of us held a deep love for literature and a strong desire to bring a love of reading to secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms across our county, but none of us had tackled a project of this magnitude before. We wrote this article to share resources and lessons learned to support other educators exploring the idea of building secondary classroom libraries.

Independent Reading and Michigan's Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction

As we engaged schools and districts in professional learning around the recently published Essential

Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom: Grades 6 to 12 (2019), we saw that educators connected with the expectation that they offer "diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities in the school," but they grappled with not having the resources needed to enact this practice. This gap became even clearer as we recognized that Essential Practice #2 asks teachers to provide access and regular opportunities to read with a wide range of texts (i.e. print, audio, visual, and multimodal) of varying complexity, structure, and genre (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry, comics, newspaper articles, magazines, journals, advertisements, websites, discussion boards, internet postings), including the following:

- rigorous texts on grade level and beyond,
- texts that connect to their interests and reflect their own and others' backgrounds and cultural experiences, and
- texts that allow students to reflect on their own identities as well as engage them in exploring identities different than their own.

Additionally, teachers are called to:
- engage students with texts that provide entry way

into questions, puzzles, themes, authors, issues, and/or genres that can be investigated further.

• foster a reading culture that promotes engagement with diverse texts in a variety of contexts (e.g. independent reading, online communities, reading conferences, book clubs, book talks) (2019).

Teachers and administrators alike appreciated these points, but their book rooms and dwindling access to school libraries and media center specialists simply did not support such abundant opportunity for choice and engagement.

There were some teachers who were already playing with the idea of implementing independent choice reading in their classrooms, and we found a lot of merit in that. According to the National Council of the Teachers of English (NCTE) Statement of Independent Reading (2019), "[i]ndependent reading leads to an increased volume of reading. The more one reads, the better one reads…This increased volume of reading is essential." This assertion that independent choice reading is essential is echoed by Kittle (2013), who states that "Rigorous independent reading will not only build background knowledge and vocabulary but also provide a fundamental necessity: regular practice." Regular practice with reading helps students "build confidence to meet new literacy challenges; confident readers are more likely to be engaged" (Lent, 2009). Additionally, if students are motivated to read books of interest to them, they will also be more engaged in the reading, as "[e]ngagement and motivation are tightly linked" (Guthrie, 2008).

While the research certainly supports the practice of implementing independent reading, we unfortunately found that schools' resources often did not. Most secondary teachers who were enacting some form of independent choice reading were spending their own money to build classroom libraries to supplement the resources their districts had, but they struggled to keep up with the new releases their students craved. What's more, we found providing resources to be even more challenging in schools with few resources to begin with. Many of the schools that we were supporting were either alternative schools without a media center or had seen drastic budget cuts that resulted in even less access to school libraries. In these cases, the work of a teacher trying to supplement choice reading resources was even more monumental.

As we noticed this pattern, we grew more and more confident that our next step was clear: we needed to help teachers build and use classroom libraries at the secondary level. However, starting this project from scratch with 13 schools and 50 classrooms meant that we would be working on a scale that we had never imagined. To say that we had a lot of learning to do would be a vast understatement. And although we found several resources on doing this work in primary grades, we found that for middle and high school classrooms, implementation was less consistent, so there wasn't much of a precedent that we could lean into. Our hope in writing this article is to share with you lessons we learned along the way so that, whether you are just starting to explore the idea of building secondary classroom libraries or you are ready to put plans into motion, you feel as though you are not the only one out there charting this territory.

Finding the Funding

Like most things in life, it all comes down to money. And those of us who work in education know that available budgets come with many strings attached, often in the form of required documentation. However, during the 2019-2020 school year, we discovered some increased flexibility in terms of how we might use federal funds, specifically the Regional Assistance Grant. We discovered that these funds can be used to support schools identified by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) as needing "Comprehensive or Targeted Support." Previously, identified schools were not allowed to use these funds to purchase instructional materials such as books. With this restriction loosened, we were able to allocate grant funds toward the purchase of classroom libraries, instead of tapping into the usual sources like Title I and Title IV funds. Of course, utilizing grant money meant that we had to ensure that all bookshelves were marked with an identifier that it was purchased through a grant and that we received

confirmations from each school as they received materials. While this was no small task, it was well worth it.

Obviously, not all schools fall under the same identification from MDE and will therefore not have access to Regional Assistance Grant funds. However, we did find that some schools may qualify without realizing it. We learned that grant funds could even be used to support students within the system where there was an identified school. So, for example, if a high school was identified by the state as qualifying for comprehensive or targeted support, grant funds could also be used to support their middle school. If educators are unsure whether their school might qualify, they might start by contacting an Assistant Superintendent, Curriculum Director, or person who leads professional learning for the district. Administrators are more likely to interact with intermediate school district (ISD) staff who manage such grant funds. If a school does not have access to grant funds, educators might also explore the possibility of using Title I and Title IV funds.

Central office personnel are often much more open to requests for use of these funds than teachers might initially think, but the timeline is crucial! Central office people often make budget decisions for the upcoming school year in March (or earlier) of the previous school year. By carefully explaining the research base cited above, which provides a rationale for the use of classroom libraries to support independent choice reading, teachers might build a convincing argument.

And let's not fool ourselves—everyone loves buying books! One local district heard about our project and was inspired to use 31a (Additional Instructional Time) funds to purchase classroom libraries for every middle school ELA teacher. This investment in high quality independent choice reading texts was an easy "sell" to the district's school board members, who viewed the purchase as meeting the district's instructional and diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

Throughout this process, we learned that districts (ourselves included) often have to obtain school board approval for vendors, depending on the total amount

spent. We highly recommend checking these policies before getting quotes.

Secondary Classroom Libraries

Many resources related to stocking a classroom library are geared toward elementary teachers, but differences in ways that secondary teachers engage with their students means that the rules that apply to elementary libraries won't necessarily work in middle and high school contexts. For example, an elementary teacher usually has the same group of 20-30 students who stay in the classroom for the whole day, and most of their reading is typically done in that same classroom, whereas a high school teacher often sees six-to-seven sections of 25-35 students, who rotate throughout their classroom throughout the day, and they often have the expectation that students will take their books home with them in the evenings. For that reason, looking at elementary resources for estimating the number of books needed per classroom did not work for us. Instead, we needed research to determine how many books we should order per student enrolled so that we could operate under the assumption that that many books would be checked out at any given time.

Given the fact that secondary classroom libraries are a completely different animal from elementary classroom libraries, we knew we would have to do some digging in the research to determine how many books to purchase, how many shelves would be required to hold the books, and which books to select. Our research indicated a range regarding how many books to stock in a classroom library. We discovered that "[o]ne rule of thumb on how many books to include is to plan for a minimum of 10 books for every child in the classroom, with no less than 100 books" (Catapano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009). While some resources gave a total number and others focused on the number of individual titles per pupil, we ultimately found that most recommendations fell within the range of 10-20 books per student. Given these recommendations and the fact that this project was intended to establish—but not complete—classroom libraries, we decided to implement the minimum of the recommended range and based our order on 10 books per student enrolled in each building.

Book Selections

As we considered selecting a wide range of books for a wide range of readers, we had to think about how to purchase a diverse-enough collection to reach every reader. Some resources recommended ordering and organizing books by reading level. We recognize, as do Pearson & Heibert (2014) and Shanahan (2018), however, that there is a lack of reliability across leveling systems for books, which becomes even more nuanced in the secondary grades as students' interactions with texts takes into account more domain-specific vocabulary and complex themes.

Instead of focusing on providing a set number of books at particular reading levels, we aimed to provide books that would spark students' interests and engagement. We did, however, make sure that we had a wide range of books that fit into both middle grade and young adult categories, graphic novels to offer visual support to complex texts, and "hi-lo" (high interest, low level) books. Because we understand that students can reach higher reading levels when they are highly engaged, we also prioritized books that were more likely to spark engagement, which meant prioritizing new releases and books that teenagers were buzzing about (e.g., Guthrie, 2008). Often, booksellers will offer a large quantity of lesser-known (read: lesser-quality) books as part of a large purchase, as a way to stretch the purchaser's dollar. We were less interested in this approach and preferred to purchase fewer books of higher quality. Because newer titles are often only available in hard-cover editions, it meant that we would not be doing this on the cheap. Rather, we thought of these selections as an investment we knew we had to make if we wanted these libraries to be a vital part of classrooms.

As we considered each title, we had to determine whether to order one copy, several copies, or a full class set for each individual classroom. Using information from sources such as Project LIT Community (@ProjectLITComm, 2020), The Global Read Aloud (Ripp, 2017), and school librarians, we prioritized ordering multiple copies of the most popular titles. We wanted to provide sets of books that would support the use of book clubs and literature circles, which can often be less

of an instructional leap for teachers transitioning away from solely teaching whole-class novels and moving toward more options for student choice in books.

There were many popular titles for us to choose from, but we prioritized books that offered inclusive representation for all students. We thought about Bishop's (1990) words as we considered whether each selected text might represent a window or mirror (and, in some cases, both) for students:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.

We also thought about Muhammad's (2020) point that students "must deeply know themselves the histories and truths of other diverse people" and that "[s]tudents should not have to wait until college or adulthood to discover self for the first time." In selecting books that could present students with windows and mirrors, we prioritized #OwnVoices texts (@corinneduyvis, 2015), so were careful to select texts that represented BIPOC characters, characters who are differently-abled, and LGBTQIA+ characters written by authors who share those identities. In this way, we sought to include books that authentically represent a wide range of experiences. We were also mindful about including texts that present Black characters in joyful, celebratory events, not just traumatic ones. Additionally, for characters who are differently-abled, we wanted to include texts that centered the character, as opposed to the differing abilities. Having such a wide variety of texts would help teachers provide students with "texts that connect to their interests and that also reflect their own and others' backgrounds and cultural experiences, and texts that

allow students to reflect on their own identities as well as engage them in exploring identities different than their own," as the Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy Instruction in the Secondary Classroom encourage teachers to do.

We also made sure to include several graphic novels in our orders as we understood, largely from Schwartz's (2006) work in this area, that, in addition to frequently being underestimated for their literary merit, these "comic" books often provide entry points into reading lives for students who may not otherwise be engaged in independent reading. Additionally, many of the schools we were supporting had growing populations of students who are English Learners, and we understood that graphic novels can be an important mode to scaffold language and comprehension (e.g., Maples, Cianca & Maloy, 2016). As the classroom libraries arrived and teachers started to use them, we asked which books were particularly resonating with their students, which ones were flying off the shelves. Over and over again, teachers named two categories: 1) the hottest new releases and 2) the graphic novels.

Additional Resources

Large book vendors, such as Follett, Mackin, and BookSource, can offer customer assistance in putting together book lists and attaining bulk discounts. Additionally, we highly recommend First Book for any qualifying school, as it stretches your dollars further and offers high-quality books. Thriftbooks and Half Price Books are also great options. Most vendors are willing to work with educators if they know their goals and target budget.

These book vendors are also often willing to customize an appropriate list of books for schools to purchase. Having some demographic information can definitely streamline this process. In Michigan, one place to access school and student population information is MiSchoolData. We found suggested book lists from resources such as We Need Diverse Books (Oh, 2020), #DisruptTexts (Ebarvia, German, Parker, & Torres, 2020), Debbie Reese (2006), American Library Association Youth Media Award winners, Nerdy Book Club

(Miller, Sharp, Sokolowski & Minnich, 2020), and Libres (Hauser, 2020) helpful as well. These groups have contributed great time and expertise to reviewing and curating lists, and we leaned on them heavily throughout our process.

Because of our board policies and the large scale of the order, we opted to go through a traditional vendor to develop individualized book lists for each school based on its student demographics and areas of need. This resulted in a mix of both hardcover and softcover texts, and the raw average of the approximate cost per book fell around $7.81. If you are able to supplement with vendors who offer additional discounts, we are confident that your per-book average can end up much lower.

Professional Learning, Beliefs, and Practices

When books arrived and began showing up on bookshelves, teachers experienced equal parts excitement and apprehension. In our experience, if teachers do not have the opportunity to review relevant research and engage in opportunities for sense-making around best practice, it's possible that books may stay on shelves or—worse—teachers engage in practices that treat independent choice reading as a chore.

As with most learning, it begins with understanding one's self. We often began professional learning events with reflective activities that allowed each teacher to consider their prior experiences and identities as readers—both in and out of school.

Lifting teachers' schema around classroom libraries was also important since the practice of using classroom libraries is less common at the secondary level. We used a Frayer model (see Figure 1) to help teachers define the purpose of a classroom library, provide examples and non-examples, and build a working definition. This Frayer model provided excellent formative feedback, and participants returned to the model and refined it as learning continued. By gathering relevant research and engaging participants in a gallery walk, we offered teachers tangible examples of organizational structures, book check-out approaches, and more.
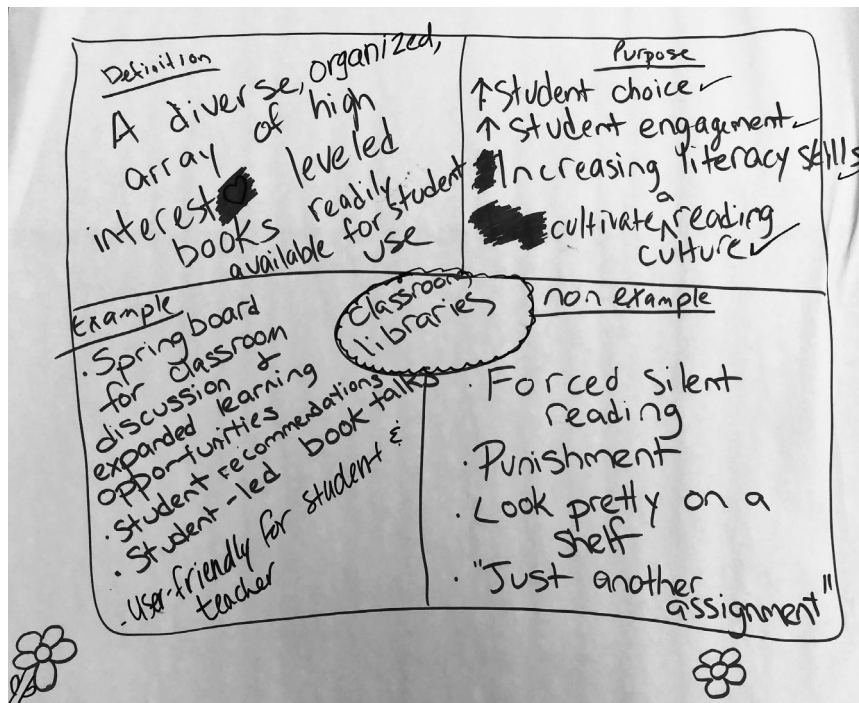
Figure 1. Frayer Model

Further learning centered around the why, what, and how of book talks, strategies for conferring, and the negative impact of incentives for independent reading. We began a conversation about book talks by viewing Sharp and Miller's (Sharp & Miller, 2017) video on book talks. The video provided teachers with a helpful "mentor text" as we moved to the next stage, which involved teachers selecting a book (one that would eventually become part of their classroom library), reading it, and sharing a book talk with other colleagues. Next, we explored book trailers—brief videos that act like movie trailers, except for books. For both book talks and book trailers, we discussed implications for building in opportunities for student ownership and considered ways that students might become involved in creating book talks and trailers.

Once we had explored effective ways to get kids interested in texts, we moved to considerations related to accountability. Teachers often ask: how will we know whether kids are actually reading? This often leads to talk of reading logs, grades, and incentives. To guide this conversation, we read and discussed research that suggests that reading logs decrease motivation (Pak &

Weseley, 2012). We also considered Beavers' (2013) exploration of the negative relationship between reading incentives and reading motivation in middle school students. Since those two approaches are ineffective, we needed to be able to provide teachers with an alternative, so we turned our attention to the power of teachers conducting one-on-one conferences with students about their independent reading. Kittle and Gallagher's (2018) helpful suggestions gave our teachers much to explore, practice, and try in their classrooms.

Next, we turned to the typical concern about "mature topics." How can teachers ensure that the books students are selecting are appropriate? How do teachers' own biases play into determining what is "appropriate" or not? What if a student's parents don't approve? These are reasonable worries—and ones that many educators and school librarians have navigated many times over the years. By reaching out to our educator network, we were able to curate several helpful examples of letters to parents/families, as well as resources from NCTE (e.g., NCTE, 2018; Ripp, 2020) and Teaching Tolerance (n.d.) to support teachers in examining their own biases and in tackling conversations with students about difficult topics in texts.

While many of our professional learning topics could be applicable to both the elementary and secondary levels, middle and high school teachers often navigate two additional constraints: less instructional time with each group of students and greater demands to have classroom activities translate into points or a letter grade. These demands, coupled with the fact that secondary students may not see themselves as readers, emphasize the need for secondary teachers to engage in high-quality professional learning in order to fully maximize the impact of having a classroom library.

Professional Learning Resources ... For Free?!

One final thought regarding professional learning: As intermediate school district consultants, we are taxpayer funded, which means that we provide services, including professional learning, at absolutely no cost to schools! If you haven't done so already, we recommend finding out which ISD/RESA/RESD consultants might be able to support you and your colleagues in this professional learning. Even if they don't have someone locally who can support the process of building classroom libraries, they can likely recommend someone who can.

Even high-quality professional development has its limits, however. As teachers continue to refine their practice around classroom libraries, they will navigate new challenges—and this is where professional networks come in. Groups such as Project Lit Community (@ProjectLITComm, 2020), We Need Diverse Books (Oh, 2020), #DisruptTexts (Ebarvia, German, Parker & Torres, 2020), and The Global Read Aloud (Ripp, 2017) offer opportunities to connect with educators around the country (and the world) who are also navigating the complexities of getting kids to read—to read widely, to read high-quality books, and to build a lifelong reader identity. These groups, consisting of both practitioners and researchers, along with continued professional development, can ensure that teachers feel supported and empowered. Shifting instructional practice from teaching whole-class novels from the literary canon to offering increased opportunities for student choice can be an isolating endeavor for many secondary ELA teachers to navigate. By building their professional learning network, they may discover that they are not alone.

Text Access During Remote Learning

COVID19 caught us completely unaware. We were happily going about our business in March, planning next steps. On March 10-11, we were in districts that received classroom libraries, facilitating professional learning on supporting choice reading. Within two days, all schools closed their doors to in-person instruction and moved to emergency remote learning. Suddenly, book selection and discourse seemed impossible.

As several schools decided to start the 2020-21 school year in remote instruction, we returned to one of our original project questions: how do we get texts (either physical or electronic) into students' hands? Luckily, the educational community is generous, creative, and communicative. We scoured Twitter and our professional networks for ideas and slowly began to curate a list of ideas and resources. We compiled our resources into a hyperdoc (see Figure 2). We know that as the year continues, this list will grow and change, but it has provided us resources for keeping the work of engaging students' choice reading going even in remote spaces. This was certainly not where we anticipated going when we embarked on our classroom library journey, but it proved to be another lesson in the making.

As we explored the multitude of options for e-book resources, we noticed that the selection of quality texts was limited. However, we discovered that a $15 dollar-per-student investment in the Sora app from Overdrive would result in an average of four e-books per student throughout the course of the year. The Sora app served two purposes. First, it would connect each student to digital resources available for free from the public library, thus sparking a positive (and hopefully life-long) connection to the public library. Second, the e-books available for a fee met our qualifications for high-quality, popular, and inclusive texts. In many cases, we were able to select ebook versions of texts we had originally purchased for the physical classroom libraries, which was a bonus.

As with our previous iteration of the project, we knew that we would need to offer professional learning to accompany the access to texts. In addition to providing teachers with an overview of the Sora app, we collaborated with public library youth librarians, who were eager to partner with us in order to get each student signed up for a library card and provide teachers with information about digital tools available through the library. While this was an unanticipated pivot in our

project, the benefits of connecting students with public libraries made all of the effort worthwhile.

Figure 2. Book/Text Access During COVID-19 QR Code and Bit.ly Link

https://bit.ly/Book-Access-COVID19

Since beginning this huge endeavor, the world of education has shifted. However, we remain committed to supporting secondary ELA teachers in providing students with access to a wide range of independent choice reading. As we problem-solve book access and remote support during remote and interrupted learning, we are hopeful that, through engaging, choice reading, students will feel connected to their schools, their teachers, and their own reading lives. In her TED Talk "The Healing Power of Reading," Michelle Kuo (2020) illustrates our greatest hope: "How do we diminish the distance between us? Reading is one way to close that distance. It gives us a quiet universe that we can share together, that we can share in equally." From creating more inclusive reading spaces to helping students to access engaging books, we wish nothing more than for reading to close the distance in this most exceptional school year and beyond.

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Author Biographies

Jenelle Williams is a Literacy Consultant within the Leadership and School Improvement unit at Oakland Schools. She joined the organization in 2017 following 18 years of experience in public schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. She has served as a classroom teacher, IB Middle Years Programme Coordinator, teacher leader, and educational technology coach. An IB Educator since 2013, Jenelle leads professional development workshops for coordinators and building leaders in IB World Schools. She holds an Education Specialist in Leadership degree and a Master's degree in Reading and Language Arts through Oakland University. Jenelle is passionate about supporting teachers, building leaders and central office administrators in the area of secondary literacy, and she is especially excited to be able to support Michigan's work around disciplinary literacy through her role as Co-Chair of the statewide Disciplinary Literacy Task Force.

Megan Kortlandt is Literacy Consultant at Oakland Schools Intermediate School District. Megan is especially passionate about supporting teachers to reach all learners through engagement, authenticity, and autonomy. She also believes it is critical to continuously develop administrators' instructional leadership, and she is currently working on a forthcoming book through ASCD on this topic. When she's not teaching or facilitating professional learning, she's writing about it as a contributor to the Moving Writers blog. She can be reached at Megan.Kortlandt@oakland.k12.mi.us.