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## Student-Involved Classroom Libraries

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## Student-involved classroom libraries

JILL A. JONES

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The aggressive patter of Claudia's (all names are pseudonyms) little feet break the silent reverie of the classroom's Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) time. My eyes glance up from the novel I am engrossed in to see several children stop whisper-reading and Claudia's hazel eyes piercing mine. Her intense demeanor awakens my "teacher sensors," so I leave the reading table to meet her halfway. As I approach, I see that she is not hurt, but her small, oval face is flushed, clearly showing either frustration or excitement about something. We meet by the chalkboard, and Claudia immediately hands me a Clifford book. With her hands on her hips, she states, "See here, Dr. Jones, this is Christmas, not just Clifford. This book should be in the Christmas category. Alyssa, Ashni, Molly, and I all agree, so can we change it?" I tell her she needs to bring that book to our family meeting time and we'll discuss it as a class. During family meeting Claudia states her opinion and shows the children several parts of the book about Christmas. Many begin to agree with Claudia, and then sweet, quiet Paolo raises his hand. With his eyes cast downward, Paolo says, "Clifford books are my favorite, and I like having them all in the same spot." The children then agree to keep the book in its current location.

The above vignette, and many more like it, took place in my first-grade classroom. The children's intense dialogue concerning a book's structure and appropriate genre placement is just one of the many positive results of allowing children the privilege and opportunity to organize their classroom library system.

The media center is typically the place where most children choose their books; however, due to tight schedules, rigorous curricula, state-testing mandates, and overcrowded schools, children in the United States often spend a limited amount of time exploring this area of their school. Choosing

a book also can be an overwhelming endeavor, even when children have the intrinsic desire to read. The book-choice task becomes more problematic when children are given time restraints or do not have easy access to the library. Because research shows that students need to spend a large amount of time reading in order to improve and hone their reading skills (Allington, 2001), what better place for children to have access to books than in their own classroom (Neuman, 1999; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002; Routman, 2003)?

### The student-involved classroom library

Instead of having children arrive in your classroom and expecting them to assimilate your library organization, I propose you involve them in the process. After working with over 100 teachers in 10 different school settings, it is my experience that the student-involved classroom library process increases the number of books children choose from their classroom library. Dozens of informal e-mails and specific survey feedback from teachers also report positive results (see Figure 1). My favorite response came from a third-grade teacher, the grade that feels the enormous effects of mandatory retention linked to high-stakes testing. The teacher wrote that her children *made* their own library. They took ownership of it. They were proud of their work and could find the books they wanted. She explained that her library had been a "junk pile," and she couldn't understand why students weren't reading. But she closed with these words: "Now my kids read 24/7. Loved it!"

## Beginning the process

The process begins with the teacher talking to students about what a group or category looks like. With young children, I often play the "guess what group this is" game by calling up several children with one common characteristic and having the others guess the category. The categories start simply (boys, girls, blue jeans) and become more complex. (Did the blue pants fit in the blue jeans category? Did tennis shoes include the high-heeled style some girls wear?) This category discussion allows the teacher to prepare the children for grouping the library books. For some teachers this discussion is simply to remind the children about groups they had created in science; for others it is an elaborate lesson with guided practice follow-up. The important point to remember is to follow the needs of your students.

Once students understand the concept of categorizing, the teacher facilitates a discussion involving ways to group books. All the children's ideas are written on a permanent surface (I use chart paper) because the organizational task takes several days, and the children will need to refer to this original and growing reference. Once several categories are written, the teacher can offer ideas and ask if students would like them added to the list.

The next step is to take unorganized books out of the library and put a pile in front of each child. (I have found that this step is a difficult activity for teachers who are incredibly organized and already have their libraries in order.) It is important to have the children in cooperative groups because each group will work together to create categories for the books they are given. I have observed that children of all ages can easily generate categories during the brainstorming activity but often become confused during the actual task of categorizing the books. It is vital that the teacher, and any other volunteers, walk around to each group listening to the conversations and observing student interactions with the books. Children often get excited about the books they are discovering and want to spend some time reading them.

"Please don't read that book now," is not an easy statement for any teacher. Nevertheless, it is often necessary to tell children that they are not supposed to be reading the books now but looking for ways to group them based on the title, pictures,

**FIGURE 1**  
**Student-involved classroom libraries**  
**anonymous survey**

1. Approximately how many hours did you devote to organizing your classroom library?
  - A. 5-10
  - B. 10-15
  - C. 15-20
  - D. 20-25
2. What grade level do you teach? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Approximately how many books do you have in your classroom library?
  - A. 50-100
  - B. 100-200
  - C. 200-300
  - D. over 300
4. Was the classroom time devoted to this project worthwhile?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
5. Why?
 

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6. Please state any benefits or problems you observed from having the children organize their classroom library.
 

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7. Do you intend to repeat this procedure next year?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
8. Comments:
 

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and information on the back of each cover. Another common observation concerns the primary children's notion of "mine." I quickly discovered that kindergarten through second-grade children often do not want to share "their" book pile with the group. Having an adult ready to quickly remind the children that *all* these books are "ours" for use all year easily defuses this issue.

## The teacher as facilitator

While facilitating the grouping process, the teacher also is able to learn important information about the children's concepts of literature. In many instances the conversations will cause the teacher to develop and implement minilessons concerning the differences between fiction and nonfiction; fairy tales, fables, and folk tales; and various other topics. Another key element is the excitement generated by the children when they discover interesting books in their own classroom library. While children are actively taking part in the organizational structure, they are also becoming acquainted with the book choices.

When walking around the room, it is vital that the teacher listen to the book categories each group is creating. By knowing what book groups are forming, the teacher can praise progress, remind the children to use the brainstorm chart, ask leading questions, and monitor learning. After about 10 minutes (this time varies depending on the grade level), the teacher strategically asks one group to share a specific category. It is very important that the teacher choose a smaller category (e.g., Mercer Mayer, Dr. Seuss, Junie B. Jones) to begin with instead of a larger, open-ended grouping (e.g., Science). After a group has shared its category—for example, Clifford books—I ask the other groups to look through their books to see if they have any Clifford books. Children from all over the room then hold up their books, and an adult collects them and places them in the correct basket. By having an adult pick up

each book, the teacher is able to monitor which children are able to follow the grouping task and ensure the correct placement of books. The Clifford books are then placed in an appropriate tub or basket with a sticky note stating the group name. The teacher then selects another group to share its category, and the process continues.

Oftentimes it is necessary to discuss what a book needs in order to fit in a certain category. For example, a kindergarten and a fifth-grade class would have two very different ideas about which books fall into the Scary Books category. My experience with this process, coupled with feedback from teachers, leads me to believe that each classroom solves these issues according to students' personalities and classroom library book choices. A classroom library with a lot of books about insects might have its own insect category; however, students in another class might decide they want insect books in the Scary Book category because their library only has two insect books. Regardless of the outcome, the conversation and the educational process are remarkable. (See Table 1 for a list of common book groups.)

## Timetables

Please keep in mind that the organizational process is not completed in a day. Depending on the size of your library, it could take anywhere from a week to a month. The important thing to remember is to do the categorizing in small increments. I have found that 20 minutes is about all kindergarten children can handle, and then the discussions begin to wander from the topic. (Time varies, depending on grade level, time of day, and other factors.) When the teacher decides it is time to stop categorizing, the children simply put their ungrouped books back on the shelf or into boxes for another day. The next time the teacher is ready to begin classifying, the uncategorized books are passed out and the children are asked to begin the grouping process. It is also a good idea to ask the children to quickly check for books that have already been categorized (e.g., Clifford, Scary Books).

## Choosing baskets and bins

Once the books are grouped, they are placed in tubs and baskets of different sizes. I have discovered

**TABLE 1**  
Examples of book categories

Insects	Reading counts
Scary	Accelerated reader
By author (e.g., Mercer Mayer)	Science
By characters (e.g., Clifford)	Math
Seasons	Holiday
Weather	Poetry
Animals that act like people	Folk tales
True animal	Fairy tales
Fiction animal	Tall tales
Joke	People stories
Chapter books	Family stories
Famous people	Books about pigs
Beginning readers	(turtles, dogs, cats)
By publisher	Picture
	New books



that dollar stores, thrift stores, and parents are great sources for the tubs. My favorite book display tub is an empty rectangular flower box that fits nicely in many locations and displays two stacks of books. I also like the shower caddy basket because there is room to place similar books together—for example, electricity books on one side and weather books on the other. The wonderful aspect of grouping books in this fashion is that all the books are viewed by looking at the front cover. I would love it if my favorite bookstore reorganized in this fashion. Another bonus to using the baskets is that books are located throughout the room instead of in just one area. For teachers who have very large collections, some books might have to be kept in storage and rotated. For example, I have a colleague who has at least 1,000 holiday books. Instead of having all her books displayed, this teacher keeps out 50 and then rotates them every few weeks.

### Color-coding baskets

Each basket of books receives a label with a corresponding color-coded dot. Then all the books in that basket receive the same color coding. For example, all the Clifford books have a yellow dot, and all the Junie B. Jones books have a green dot. Once all the colors are used, it becomes necessary to add symbols to the color; for instance a green dot with an *S* is on all the science books. This organizational process makes the library easy to maintain.

It is important to buy the colored dots that are reuseable, for two reasons. First, as the year progresses the children often decide they disagree with a book's classification. Just as the vignette at the beginning of this article illustrates, they are always finding new ways to categorize books. Remember, time did not allow the children to read all the books prior to the original categorization process. Now, as they read the books, they are refining the categories. The discussions regarding book categories are a literacy byproduct of this process. These grand conversations demonstrate children's higher understanding of genres and author purpose.

The second reason for choosing reuseable colored dots involves the next academic year. When I present the idea of student-involved classroom libraries at different schools, I inevitably get the question "What about next year?" My response is,

"It depends on the teacher." Every year I would personally begin in the same manner, with all the books in boxes waiting for help from the children. The thought of messing up this great organizational system is too daunting for some teachers (and too stressful I have found), so I tell them to do this. Take the labels off the book tubs and give each group an unidentified tub. Ask the children to look through the books to see if those books fit into any of the categories they have brainstormed. Next, ask the children if all of the books belong in that category. If the children decide to move some books, simply peel off the color-coded labels and put on new ones. The children are still looking at the books in their library and taking an active part in the categorizing and labeling process, and the teacher does not have a complete breakdown. (See Figure 2 for an annotated version of the process.)

### Choosing a just-right book

Now that the library is organized, how does the teacher match books to readers? The library is not arranged by levels, so the teacher can't say, "Billy, you choose books from the blue bin, and Susie, you choose books from the green bin." The solution is for the teacher to show students how to choose a just-right book and recognize the difference between easy, hard, and just-right books. This method follows the old proverb "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." I have seen children as young as kindergarten make smart book choices once they have received explicit and tangible instructions about the book-choice process.

### Reaping the benefits

It is common knowledge that the more children read, the better readers they become; however, providing children with easy access to books, motivating them to choose books, and appropriately matching each child to the correct book can be a daunting endeavor. This article provides a way to accomplish this educational task by coupling student involvement in the organizational process with student enlightenment regarding the book-choice process.

I propose we teachers shift our thinking and let children into the organizational process, because

**FIGURE 2**  
**Annotated steps for student-involved classroom libraries**

**Supply list**

Baskets, paper for labels, clear packing tape for adhering labels to baskets, color-coded dots, books

**The plan**

1. Talk to the children about categorizing or grouping.
2. Ask the children to talk about ways they would group books.
3. After placing children in cooperative groups, provide each child with a stack of books. Tell the children to place these books into categories.
4. Walk around the room and facilitate (not dominate) the group discussion.

**Examples of leading questions:**

- How many books will be in this category?
- Is this fiction or nonfiction?
- How will this help us when we go to pick a book?

5. After the children have categorized for about 10 to 15 minutes, ask a group to share a specific category. Have the children in the other groups hold up books they think might fit in this category. Adults go around and pick up books. Books are then placed in an appropriate basket with a temporary label.

(Important note: By having the teacher hear all the categories first and then selectively choose which group shares which category first, the teacher is able to direct the organizational process while using the children's ideas.)

6. Repeat the process until it is time to pack up the uncategorized books for another day.
7. Remind the children of the categories they already created. Pass out books. Have children look for books that might have been missed in any of the categories. Begin the sharing, collecting, and grouping process.
8. Make labels for each basket of books. Make sure the words are large enough to be seen at least 2 feet away. It also is a good idea to use picture symbols with primary children.
9. Place a colored dot on each book and corresponding basket label. This makes the job of maintaining the library user-friendly.
10. Strategically place baskets of books around the room, creating minireading nooks, and store excess books for periodic rotation.
11. Collaboratively create a book key listing each category and its corresponding code.
12. Teach the children how to choose a just-right book.

then *they* reap the benefits. Children (a) become acutely aware of available books, (b) get to know the book-choice process, (c) begin analyzing literature by leading and engaging in book discussions, (d) gain confidence about the book-choice process and the library organizational system, (e) gain respect for books, and (f) read more books and try new genres. I truly believe that whoever does the most work does the most learning, and too often it is the educator doing most of the work.

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