

# Building a Classroom Library

In progressive middle school classrooms, we are working hard to grow lifelong readers. Really. To us, this is not a slogan or a platitude, but an attainable goal that we reach for every day. We know that many of our students, including some from the wealthiest families, do not come from literate, print-rich homes. And though we might occasionally bemoan this sad fact, our job is to redress it during the seven hours a day the kids are with us.

One step we take to provide kids with lifelong-reader experiences is to assemble classroom libraries, those engaging materials that our students can browse. With this in mind, Steven Zemelman and I talked at length about creating a nourishing reading diet for middle and high school students.<sup>1</sup> We recognize that language arts teachers have done a great job of hooking kids on all kinds of novels—classic, contemporary, and YA. But students also need to engage with the nonfiction genres that represent 84% of adult, real-world text (and a similar percentage of the reading passages of high-stakes standardized tests).

As we build classroom libraries, we are trying to create something like the living room of a big, eclectically literate family, a place where all manner of fiction and nonfiction, books, magazines, clippings, articles, brochures, Web pages, and newspapers surround us. Some of this material will

pertain directly to the subjects that kids study in school (literature, history, science, mathematics) while other parts of the collection can be deliciously random, chosen merely because they interest many, or some, or just a few young readers.

Because we value small-group discussion, we collect some of these reading materials in multiple-copy sets. That way, groups of interested kids can form literature circles or book clubs, make a reading and meeting schedule, and talk through a particular book or magazine article together. But whether we are collecting single copies for individual independent reading or multiple copy sets for discussion groups, we want the classroom library to have range and balance; it should celebrate and feed the unique enthusiasms of the kids (and the teacher) who live in the room.

## A Balanced Collection

So exactly what kinds of materials should kids, adolescents, teenagers, be offered? What range of genres, styles, categories of texts, will grow them best? One way to answer this question is to notice what the thoughtful, curious members of the surrounding adult community are reading. Among your local lifelong learners, what's in the literacy diet? Probably you'll find these thinking grownups sampling a range of genres like this:

Reference books	Reviews
Manuals / Instructions	Biographies
Contracts/Legal Documents	Memoirs
News stories	Travelogues/Adventure
Feature stories	Historical accounts
Narrated nonfiction	Historical novels
Profiles	Novels
Editorials	Plays
Essays	Poetry

<sup>1</sup> *Editor's note:* This talk turned into a book, *Subjects Matter: Every Teacher's Guide to Content Area Reading*, now available from Heinemann.

And balance means more than breadth. You also need to collect plenty of easier (and harder) materials in each category, because no matter what grade your students officially represent, any group of students includes a very wide range of reading levels. While some teenage students can simply read adult trade books (Eric Schlosser's wonderfully agitating *Fast Food Nation*, HarperCollins, 2002, is written at a much easier reading level than a science textbook), we also need plenty of books that are just right for younger middle schoolers, for kids who struggle with reading generally, or for anybody who's just seeking an informative "easy read."

## A Labor of a Career

So where do you get all this diverse text—and who pays for it? First of all: take a deep breath, give yourself some time (like years,) and don't start spending your own money yet. You don't even need to begin with whole books. A good start is to gather up old magazines and newspaper articles lying around your house. General interest magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* are always a good base. Then there are countless publications of narrower focus like *Discover*, *National Geographic*, *Footsteps*, *The Utne Reader*, and *Popular Mechanics*, whose stories often relate to the subjects taught in middle school.

Whether you're scrounging your own basement or ordering from a catalog, don't forget the "easy reading" dictum: Especially accessible publications include everything from the sober but authoritative *New York Times Upfront* to *Teen People*, *YM*, or even the dreaded *National Enquirer*. In our Chicago classrooms, kids read magazines on music, fashion, health, skateboarding, hairdos, car repair, and motorcycles. We aren't arbiters of taste or defenders of high culture; we want to see kids *reading*. Any topic relating to the teacher's hobby or interest (photography, travel, needlepoint, fishing, etc.) should be included in the classroom library, too.

Now let's move up to books. If your school or department has a budget line for supplementary materials, I'm jealous. If you don't spend the money soon, I'll try to tap your budget line some-

how. For the rest of us, it's beg, borrow, or steal—not necessarily an arduous or unpleasant process. We already began by searching our own homes for anything that might possibly fit in a classroom library. Now you can hit up your relatives and neighbors for discards, or start scrounging garage sales, where 25-cent books aren't unheard of.

If your students still participate in a book club like Troll, Scholastic, or Tab, you get points for everything kids order, which you can use to build your classroom library. Plus, you can ask kids to donate the books they've ordered (after they read them, of course, and written a review to guide future readers). While we are talking about kids as book donors, remember that in some schools, families can be a major source of materials. Some of our teacher buddies give a tear-jerking appeal for castoff books and magazines at every Fall parents' night, and then enjoy the parade of kids schlepping in useful materials for days afterwards.

What specific books should you put in your classroom library? For the most part, just follow your instincts, take recommendations from colleagues, ask the kids for their nominations and contributions, stock up on the major prize-winners, and scan the current adult trade lists for books kids can enjoy. Of course, we have our own favorites; in *Subjects Matter* there's an annotated list of 150 recommended titles—which takes up 30 times the space of this column. I guess every reader has an opinion.

But one special favorite deserves mention here: *Uncle John's Bathroom Readers* from Portable Press. If you can get past the unfortunate name (and thousands of middle school teachers have), these thick, quirky anthologies are a terrific source of short nonfiction, much of it worth discussing and none of it having to do with bathrooms. Each *Uncle John* book contains hundreds of short (one paragraph to three-page) fact-filled pieces on a weird and wide array of fascinating topics: Why does popcorn pop? Who planned the White House? Why do wintergreen Life Savers make sparks when you bite them in the dark? The *Uncle John* series is now up to 13 volumes, all of which ought to sit right beside *The Guinness Book of World Records* in every middle school classroom.