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Classroom Libraries

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One of the most important elements a teacher can use to create an environment that enhances a student's desire to read and that makes reading enjoyable is a classroom library. Classroom libraries also give students easy access to a variety of books on their reading level.

Acquiring Books

Gathering the books does not need to be difficult or expensive. Inexpensive books can be obtained through a children's book club and school book clubs (teachers can usually get free books), garage sales, thrift stores, and library book sales. Some bookstores might even be willing to donate a few books. The classroom library can also be supplemented with books from the local public library or even the school library. This can be especially helpful when several books are needed on a particular subject that is being studied.

Grouping Books

Having an organized, user-friendly library is extremely important to limit frustration and allow students to easily find books that are interesting to them. There are several different ways to organize books in the classroom. Let me share something that worked for me. When I first started my small classroom library, I grouped the books in two basic categories, picture books and chapter books. This allowed the students to easily put the

books back in their proper category. Since my library was small, organizing the books this way worked for me. I also displayed books throughout the room, on the chalkboard tray, on tables around the room, on the bookshelves I used for my teaching books, and even on my desk.

When I had a larger library, I organized the books into four categories: picture books, chapter books, informational books, and poetry books. The category of informational books included some picture books and even some poetry books, depending on the book's content. The different book categories were located in different places on the bookshelves. They were separated by colored dividers with the book category written on them.

In the upper elementary grades the teacher might alphabetize the books within the different categories. Small colored dots that match the different categories could be placed on the inside front cover of the book to indicate to the students in what category the book belongs. This would not mess up the book's cover or the binding, and no important information on the book's cover would be hidden.

Making a Card Catalog

Make card catalogs using 4-inch by 6-inch index cards and store them in an index card box or a decorated shoe box. The index card could include a colored dot indicating the category of the book, the title, author, ISBN number, a picture of the cover, and a short

description. A picture of the book's cover can be obtained from book catalogs, book club flyers, or off the internet. The short description can be obtained from similar sources, or (my favorite) the students could write a short description and their opinion of the book. Students enjoy reading another student's opinion of the book. This has been found to be very effective in promoting the book to the other students. The index cards could be put in alphabetical order by title, within each category.

Using Your Library

Once students find a book that interests them, they should be encouraged to have fun reading it. The students might enjoy having a special place to read, like a bean bag chair, special mats to read on, or a soft blanket or quilt.

During silent reading time my students enjoyed getting under the front of their desks where the writing surface was located. They took off their shoes and got comfortable, preparing for the reading adventure. Some of the boys formed a collaborative reading group, sharing the pictures in their books with each other.

In November the students read around the stacks of food they collected for the hungry. What a beautiful scene they created! After silent reading time, the students shared some of their thoughts with the class. There was not enough time to hear everyone, every time. It would probably work better to have the students share in small groups and then share the highlights with the whole group. Sometimes the students wrote in their reading journals after silent reading, then they shared their journals.

Checking Out and Returning Books

In order to take a classroom library book home, the students had to check out the book with me. I recorded the date, the student's name, and the title of the book. The student was then allowed to keep the book for three

weeks unless special circumstances occurred. Generally students could check out one book at a time; however, for class projects they were allowed to check out more. When the book was returned, I put the date beside the checkout entry and drew a line through the entire entry. This allowed me to flip through my library spiral notebook and, at a glance, see which books had not been returned. The students were then responsible for putting the book back on the shelf where it belonged.

With a large library, returning books to the shelf could be difficult for the students. Student bookshelf markers could be made out of rulers with the students names written on them. Using the check-out and check-in procedure, all the students returned the books. Allowing students to take the books home might seem very risky since some students choose not to bring the books back. On the other hand, I think it is important to give students the privilege and the responsibility to check out books to read at school and at home and to bring them back in the same condition they received them.

Extensions

My classroom library generated several alternatives to the traditional book report. Students chose the format. These were not assigned for each book read, but usually once a month or after every fifth book. The following are ways the students responded to the books they read.

- Write down what they thought of the book on a sticky note. The note can be put on the inside front or back cover for the other students to read and help them make wise book choices.
- Make a bookmark after they read a book and explain to the class why they illustrated it the way they did.
- Read a book aloud into a tape recorder for the listening center.

- Write a sequel, or a different ending to the book and attach it to the back of the book.
- Present a drama presentation of the book to encourage other readers to check it out.
- Draw some illustrations to insert in the chapter book they read.
- Write a letter to the author or illustrator of the book they read. If a reply comes, put the correspondence in an envelope taped to the back of the book.

My classroom library generated more reading, and more excitement about reading, than any other part of my reading program. Maybe it would work as well for you.