Are Classroom Libraries Necessary? Student Voices from First grade through High School Students.

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Abstract

This research examines the need for a classroom library from the perspective of students within each grade level. The research explores opinions on reading engagement through the lens of those students in the classroom. Undergraduate, preservice teachers enrolled in a field-based course, collected the data from 17 regular education classrooms, 260 students across 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, and high school grades, throughout seven urban school districts. The questionnaire was designed to answer three key questions, 1) "Do you like to read? 2) Does your current classroom have a quality classroom library? and, 3) Does having a good classroom library make you read more?" We felt it was important to understand first and foremost if the students did, in fact, enjoy reading. If they did enjoy reading, did they have access to a quality classroom library? This study brings a level of awareness to future and current teachers on the literary needs of classroom students from first grade to high school. Our pre-service teachers who participated study would often ask if classroom libraries were necessary since each school usually has a library for all students to use. Moreover, they were concerned with the expense of establishing and maintaining a classroom library. The results of this qualitative study shows that classroom libraries do provide access to quality literature and also motivate children to read more. This study brings a level of awareness to future and current teachers on the literary needs of classroom students from first grade to high school.

In the age of technology, it is noteworthy to address classroom libraries and whether they are becoming a thing of the past. It appears books have taken a backseat to the use of technology. "Technology literacy" is the new term and is all the buzz in education today. It is not a far cry to believe students have never been introduced to the term, the "Dewey Decimal System." Although the Dewey Decimal System still exists and has helped students navigate the library for over a hundred years, we are long past the days of using the old wooden catalogs from elementary school. The Dewey Decimal System also has gone digital.

Teachers are attending professional development and workshops on topics of technology and how to apply technology in the classroom. Preservice teachers are perplexed on how to observe teachers in university and practicum courses when a lot of the teaching is done on Chromebooks and Tablets, rather than in front of a chalkboard.Even in teacher education programs, classroom libraries seem to be a second thought to courses covering classroom management techniques, instructional strategies, and multimedia courses. Core subjects such as reading and mathematics aretaught on computers. Assessments are given on computers as well.With the stringent schedule teachers are compelled to adhere to in the teaching of core subjects, there is the question as to

whether students even time have to peruse the classroom library if one was available. If a classroom library is available, the question remains as to whether students would choose to use their free time reading books over the computer. Apps, Google Classroom, Docs, and Drive are all technical terms that stream through today's classroom discourse.Rather than focusing on how to stock a classroom library, teachers are inundated with learning how to apply Apps, Google Drive, Gmail tips and tricks, and the list goes on. Is the simplicity of the classroom library still pertinent in today's classroom and are students still interested in reading traditional books? This research looks at the use of the classroom library in the age of technology and whetherclassroom libraries are necessary for providing literary rich environments from the student perspective.

Past research demonstrates classroom libraries are important for all ages (McGill-Franzen&Botzakis, 2009;Gallagher, 2009;Atwell,2007;Williams, Hamilton-Pennell, et al., 2000).Classroom libraries are thought mostly to be used at the early childhood or elementary level, but research shows that classroom libraries are important even in secondary education.   The more books students are introduced to, the more likely they are to read (Krashen,Lee,&McQuillan,2008). Classrooms that provide well-stocked libraries manifest students who read 50% more than those classrooms that do not (Booksource, 2003; Hunter 1999). It is documented those high-quality and organized classroom libraries are found to motivate and encourage students to read(Kelley, M.&ClausenGrace,N.,2010;Worthy&Roser,2010;Guthrie,2008;Routman,2003).

Teachers must utilize all available resources, especially when implementing, differentiated instruction (Cox, 2008). Differentiated instruction is more easily supported when a library exists in the classroom. A classroom library offers more availability of appropriate text in matching student skill level and interest. It alsoprovides the opportunity for students to practice the necessary skills needed inbecoming strong readers.To support differentiated instruction and encourage student interests, classroom libraries need to provide books in different genres, themes, topics, and books available for varying reading abilities. It is also important to find books that are culturally similar to the lives of the students in the classroom (Catapano, Flemind, & Elias, 2009). Students need to have access to texts in which they see themselves and their experiences valued, as well as texts that represent a diversity of characters, setting, and stories reflective of our broader society (Books, 2007; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001; Koss, 2015; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). The choice in reading material gives ownership and value to the process and encourages children to explore genres they may not have thought were interesting.

To encourage reading, even the organization of the classroom library is important. Just as it is important to pick the right, "Apps" to use in the classroom, it is also important to pick the right books. In building an effective classroom library, new teachers are sometimes in a disarray of where to begin. It is recommended that student teachers visit various garage sales, thrift stores, dollar stores, and book fairs in selecting books for their classrooms, but what types of books to select was not as clear (Catano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009).Students engage more when they are motivated to read, and a wide variety of captivatingchoices increases reading motivation. Engagement is not to be taken lightly: "reading-comprehension test scores are more influenced by students' amount of engaged reading thanany other single factor" (Routman, 2003 p. 66). The focus of all classroom teachers is the success of their students and providing a foundation for independent reading is part of that success.

The rule of thumb on how many books to plan for a well-established classroom library is to consider at least 10 books per child, with no less than 100 books (Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993)   Some researchers even suggest 700-750 books per primary classroom(Allington & Cunningham, 2001). With the high number of books recommended, organization is key.

Classroom libraries that are well organized demonstrate that reading is valued and is an essential resourcefor any classroom (Bickert, 1999). The physical environment, the content of the collection, and the organization are all important components in providing an aesthetically pleasing environment for students to gather. Pillows, rugs, bean bag chairs, and soft lighting are all ways to create a relaxing and positive environment for students to read comfortably (Driller, 2005). The display of the books is also imperative in encouraging students to peruse different types of books. It is recommended that books face forward, so that students may easily view the pictures and content. Books may be grouped by themes, topics, and even genres separating realistic fiction from fantasy. There is a lot of planning that goes into providing a high-quality classroom library (Catano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009), but the more time spent in offering various books, the more likely students are to read.

It is a well-known fact that teachers spend a substantial amount of their money buying resources for their classrooms. The expense of purchasing quality literature at various reading levels can be expensive, especially for

a new teacher.A classroom with approximately 1,000 books, could total up to at least $5000 in cost (Miller &Sharp, 2019). To explore the topic further, questionnaires were developed and distributed by pre-service teachers while student teaching. The questionnaires focused on K-12 student's attitudes towards the classroom library or lack of having one. Two hundred and sixty students completed the questionnaires, which included 19 first-graders, 63 second-graders, 23 fourth-graders, 83 fifth graders, and 40 high school students. This article reviews whether classroom libraries are necessary and if they continue to play a role in the daily routine of students in the classroom.

Research Method

The qualitative research study originated through curiosity, in that the preservice teachers often asked if the classroom library were necessary, due to having a school library available in the school building. "Why go through the expense?" they would ask. To instill the value of conducting research as a teacher, we encourage our students to look for research-based practices and where there is a gap, conduct their own research. We explained one of the most valuable tools for classroom teachers is the ability to do action research to answer questions that pertain to theirclassrooms. They soon discovered that current research on the need for classroom libraries is not easily found. Our students were excited to learn about the action research cycle and to answer the question, "Are classroom libraries necessary?"

Data were collected from 17 regular education classrooms, 260 students across 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, and high school grades, throughout seven urban school districts in NE Oklahoma. Undergraduate, preservice teachers enrolled in a field-based course, collected the data. The survey was, to a degree, informal, in that the observers were not trained, and the classrooms were not randomly chosen. The questionnaire was designed to answer three key questions, 1) "Do you like to read? 2) Does your current classroom have a quality classroom library? and,3) Does having a good classroom library make you read more?" We felt it was important to understand first and foremost if the students did, in fact, enjoy reading. If they did enjoy reading, did they have access to a quality classroom library? Quality, being defined as one with different genres, graphic novels, non-fiction text, culturally diverse, and multi-levels.

The data collection process was done through paper questionnaires after permissions were granted. The first and second-grade pre-service teachers read the questions to the students and allowed them to circle the answer that they felt best described their feelings. Many of the high school students preferred not to participate in the study, leaving only 41 to complete the questionnaire.

Results

Concurrent with previous research from the National Assessment of Education Progress Report (2015), students have more positive attitudes towards reading when they have been exposed to classrooms with classroom libraries. The findings for the first question of this research study, "Do you like to read?"produced positive results.Most students overwhelmingly answered that they, in fact, did enjoy reading (see figure 1).Past research (Wilhelm & Smith, 2002) concludes, boys do not enjoy reading as much as girls, although this study was self-report, both the majority ofboys and girls responded positively towards reading.

Figure 1
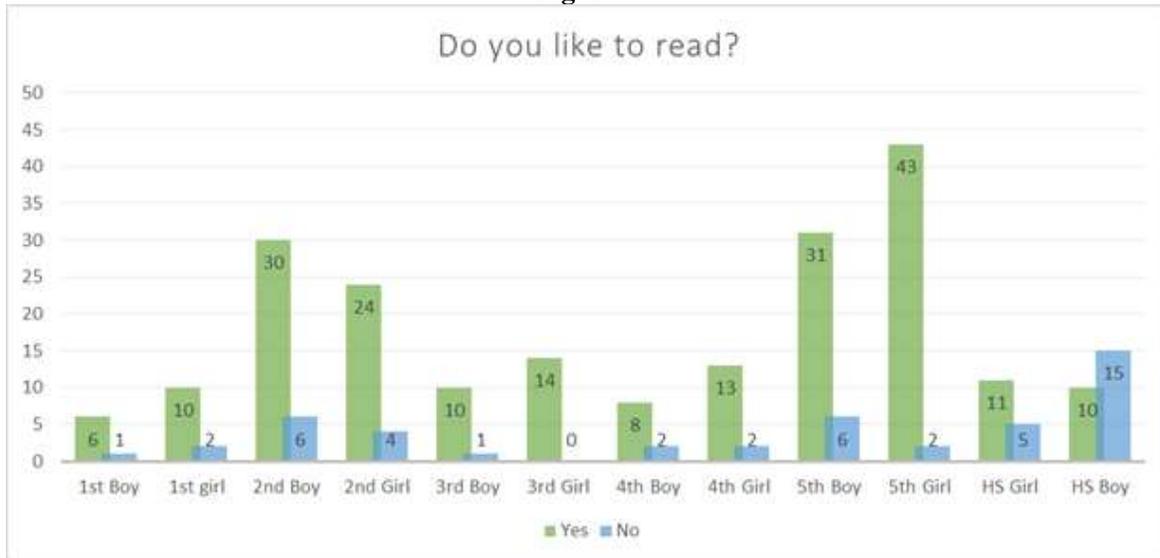
The second question that provided additional insight was "Does your classroom have a quality library?" For this question, the pre-service teachers also filled out a questionnaire concerning their mentor teacher's library. They were asked to describe the library, if one was present, in a few words. Based on the data collected the responses showed that many of the lower elementary classrooms had some sort of a classroom library area in the classroom. However, the practicum student's field experiences assigned toupper elementary and high school grade levels reported less designated areas assigned in the classroom for alibrary if there was one at all. Out of the 22 pre-service teachers who participated in the study, it was noted that the first, second, and fourth-grade classrooms had a designated library present with a quality selection of books. In the fifth grade and high school classrooms, surveyed, the presence of a library was not as common.

Figure 2

Classrooms with quality libraries present
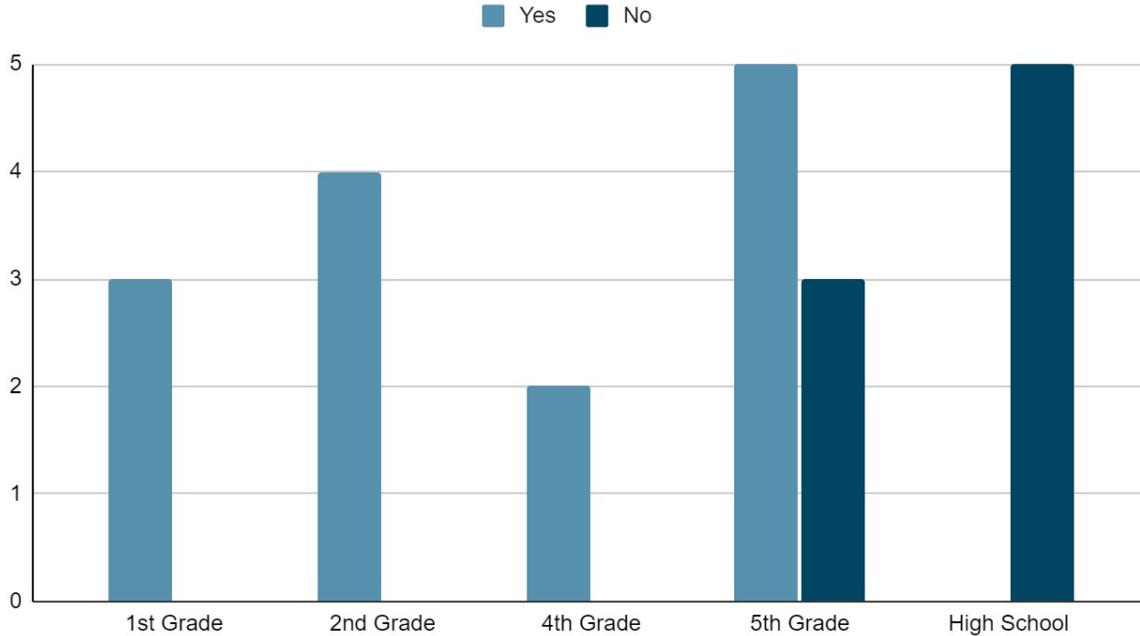
Research has established that more access to books results in more reading and that more reading leads to better literacy development (Krashen, 2004).Several studies have shown a positive relationship between access to quality literature and reading achievement (Krashen, 2004; McQuillan, 1998). In a multivariate study, McQuillan (1998) examined the relationship between access to reading material and scores on the 1992 NAEP reading test given to samples of fourth graders in 42 states in the US. His findings showed that those with more access did better.In a different research study, Miller (2009) investigated corporate scripted reading programs,only to find the simple act of reading a book of choice increased students reading performancemore sothan any of the scripted programs adopted from the Texas school district, in which students attended. One question that continues to baffle researchers in the field of reading, is the question as to whether children become less interested in reading as they graduate from primary grades to intermediate levels.To help understand whether there is a variance between primary and secondary interest levels in reading,the question was asked of participants in this study as to whether, if having access to a classroom library increased how often they read. Most students answered,"yes." Interestingly, even students in the intermediate grades agreed that when they did have access, they read more. High school boys were the only category of participants that even if they had more access to books, they would not read more (see figure 3).

Figure 3
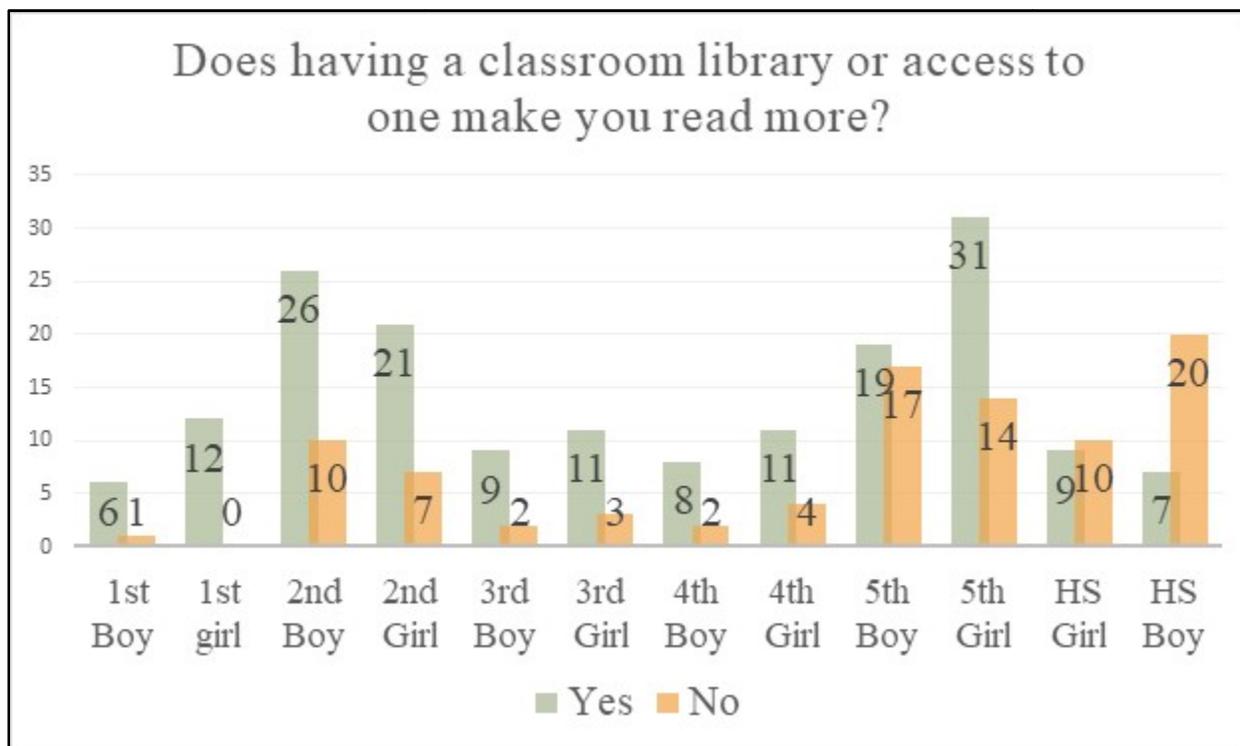
Discussion

The student voices told us that if there is a library in the classroom, they will use it. One question on the questionnaire asked, "What do you like most about your classroom library?' Although the responses were short, they spoke volumes of how students feel about having access to books in the classroom. Below is a summary of some responses by grade level (see table 1). We chose a few of the main responses by students because several of these were duplicated. For first grade, some responses were verbal in which the pre-service teacher or mentor teacher wrote on the questionnaire for the student. We acknowledge that this research is limited by size and scope, and more research is needed. Previous studies on this topic are limited and further investigation is needed on the topic of reading scores with students who have access to a classroom library and reading scores of students who do not. In this study, we were more interested in how students feel about having a classroom library and how it affects how often they read. Based on the student's responses as to whether they enjoy reading and if they tend to read more with a classroom library present, the data shows that most students will use the library and read more, even if they do not like to read. We would also like to note that this research was conducted before distance learning became necessary due to the pandemic. Consequently, students will not have access to a variety of books unless they have them at home, or the teacher incorporates electronic resources within the virtual classroom libraries.

The topic of reading

Table 1

What Do You Like About the Classroom Library?

First Grade Voices	Third Grade Voices	Fifth Grade Voices
- You can calm down - Different kinds of books - Favorite books in there - Fun to read - You can get books - It's fun - Look at pictures - Don't have to check them out "Would you be my dog" book - Choose new books - Nonfiction - Lots of books - I get to read	- You can read any book you want. - There are interesting books. "Ranger Time" is my favorite chapter book - Lots of books - You get to read them aftermath - I can read with my friend - It has cool books	- It has all different kinds of books - If I do not have any AR books, I can read from the classroom library. - Different kinds of books - A lot of interesting books - That they have books I like - I like that we get to pick it up because it is part of helping - Sometimes there are books I like - There are different books in it so I can see what books I like. - A lot of good books - Lots of fiction and non-fiction - There are good books because my teacher has good taste for good books. - It has a great selection - It is neat - If you don't have a book you can get one - I like when the school library is closed so I can get a book from the classroom library. - The seats - Small and cozy - All of the books
Second Grade Voices	Fourth Grade Voices	High School Voices
- I can read a lot. - The chair. - We can read - I can get smarter by reading. - A comfy chair. - You can read all the books you want. - I enjoy it. - You can read whenever you want - Having all those books right there.	- The back table is fun - You can get a book in the class - How it is organized - Books everywhere - The books - There are different types of books - Short chapter books - It is close, so I do not have to walk far.	- In elementary school, when I finished assignments, I would go curl up on a bean bag and read a random book from the library. - When you didn't have a book to read you could just grab one from class. - Nothing, we don't have them - More options of books to read - I don't know. Haven't seen one in a while. - The science books - Selection

		▪ Easy access, convenience, knowledge

Conclusion

This study has found that classroom libraries are still important in today's classrooms through the perceptions of students. In 2010, the amount of technology in classroomswas doubling every 72 hours (Darling-Hammond).Although technology is a major contributor in our classrooms currently, classroom libraries, in fact, still hold value.Regie Routman (2003) states, "I have seen excellent classroom libraries transform children as readers. Conversely, when there are no libraries or poor ones, students often do not like to read and do not achieve their highest potential" (p 63).Teachers who create an inviting space within their classroom for a library, show how much they value reading. Having shelves that are filled with literature that is both interesting and diverseoffers a venue for teachers and students to enhance the learning process. Aquality classroom library creates an environment that demonstrates literacy is important. The pre-service teachers who were part of this research now understand the importance of a quality classroom library to encourage reading. If our goal as educators is for all children to be successful, lifelong, readers, then immediate and frequent access to books to encourage reading in the classroom should be a priority.

Current research on the reasons for establishing a quality classroom library is lacking. Many of the research articles date back eight to ten years. Pre-service teachers often argue that in current classrooms students have access to chrome books, Ipads, and Kindles to read books, and establishing a classroom library is not necessary. However, most of the pre-service teachers admitted to reading an actual book as their preferred method of reading. Overall, it has been determined that the library emerges as a consistent predictor of reading motivation. Of course, providing access is only the first step: Even with access, some children (butsurprisingly few) will not read (Krashen, Lee, & McQuillan, 2012). Finding quality literature that students enjoy reading and rotating books throughout the year keeps students interested. Classroom libraries can be affordable through grants, rummage sales, used bookstores, and other outlets. But what is clear is that libraries matter, and they matter a lot.

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