

Jann Sorrell Fractor
Marjorie Ciruti Woodruff
Miriam G. Martinez
William H. Teale



Let's not miss opportunities to promote voluntary reading: Classroom libraries in the elementary school

Fractor and Woodruff are elementary school teachers in the Northside Independent School District, San Antonio, Texas; Martinez is Assistant Professor of Education; and Teale is Professor of Education at The University of Texas at San Antonio.

Teaching children to read has long been viewed as an educational priority. But in recent years we have become increasingly aware that teaching children to read is not a sufficient goal for literacy education: It is equally important to help children learn to value reading so that they *will* read, both for enjoyment and for information. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that too often we are not particularly successful in nurturing voluntary reading habits. Morrow and Weinstein (1982) found that very few of the primary-grade children they observed chose to look at books during their free-choice time. Greaney (1980) looked at leisure time activities of fifth-grade students and discovered that they spent only 5.4% of their time reading, and that 22% of them did not read at all!

Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding's (1988) study of how fifth graders spent their time out of school showed that 50% of the children in the sample voluntarily read 4 minutes a day or less, 30% read 2 minutes a day or less, and almost 10% reported never reading any books at all during their leisure time. Studies also indicate that a sizeable number of adults do not engage in recreational reading. The 1978 study of American book-reading and book-buying habits (Cole & Gold, 1979) showed that 45% of Americans were not book readers. And a recent survey on book purchasing in the U.S. showed that 60% of American households did not buy even one book during a 1-year period between 1990 and 1991 (NPD Group, Inc., 1991). In effect, too many Americans are aliterates—people who have the ability to read but choose not to read.

Why is this the case? Perhaps it is because many children are taught to read through a skill-drill, teach-and-test approach. Perhaps it is because quality children's literature has not been central enough in the school reading program. In any case, we must go beyond reading instruction that focuses only on developing abstract, isolated reading skills to a conceptualization of reading instruction that puts equal emphasis on developing readers who are skilled *and* who want to and do read. As Routman (1991) says, when the teaching focus shifts from work sheets and standardized tests to meaningful reading, the student becomes a literate person in the broadest sense of the word—one who continually reads, writes, thinks, listens, and evaluates for real purposes in real-life situations.

In response to the aliteracy problem, Morrow (1986) urges parents and educators to cultivate voluntary reading as an attack strategy against aliteracy. For some children, reading habits and a love of books do begin at home; however, schools need to make the development of the child-book relationship central in reading curriculum and instruction because many children do not have this experience as a central part of their lives. Because most people's reading habits have largely developed by Grade 6 (Bloom, 1964), special emphasis should be placed on promoting voluntary reading in Grades K-5.

Fortunately, researchers have identified classroom characteristics that nurture voluntary reading. Investigating classrooms where

students frequently chose to read, Morrow (1991) found teachers who (a) created opportunities for students to practice reading skills through self-selected reading during an allotted time, (b) integrated reading instruction and voluntary reading programs, (c) established attractive, accessible library centers, and (d) provided literature-related activities. Describing three classrooms in which children read widely and responded enthusiastically to literature, Hickman (1981) identified a number of features that fostered these behaviors. She found that the teachers (a) assured children of access to books by displaying books attractively and by providing ample time for children to read, (b) presented literature to children daily, (c) discussed books with children, and (d) provided children with opportunities, time, and materials to engage in book-related activities.

The classroom library

Case studies of early readers (e.g., Clark, 1976; Durkin, 1966; Tobin, 1981), ethnographic research on the family literacy experiences of children from various social and cultural backgrounds who were successfully learning to read (e.g., Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), and interviews with avid readers (e.g., Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1986) show that such children almost always have books immediately accessible at home. Fielding, Wilson, and Anderson (1986) recommend carrying this accessibility into the classroom to stimulate *all* readers, especially those without access to books at home. A key characteristic for building a community of readers in the classroom, then, is the classroom library, a focal area within the classroom where books are easily accessible to students. Bissett (1969) found that children in classrooms containing literature collections read 50% more books than did children in classrooms without such collections.

However, just having books available in a classroom library is not enough. A classroom library must be well designed to entice children to read when given the opportunity of selecting from a variety of classroom activities. Morrow and Weinstein (1982) found that children did not elect to use poorly designed classroom libraries, but a "well designed classroom library corner significantly in-

creased the number of kindergarten children who chose to participate in reading activities during free play period." The work of Morrow (Morrow, 1985; Morrow & Weinstein, 1982) and Routman (1991) indicate a number of physical features of classroom libraries that increase children's voluntary use of books:

- **Focal area:** The area is attractive and highly visible. It is obvious that the library is an important part of the classroom.

- **Partitioned and private:** Boundaries set apart the library area from the rest of the classroom and afford a quiet place to read.

- **Comfortable seating:** Without seating, children are less likely to use the library. Seating may be carpet, chairs, beanbags, or other creative options.

- **Five to six books per child:** This enables book variety, and duplicate copies can be read and discussed by children.

- **Books that provide a variety of genres and reading levels:** For young children, teachers can provide picture storybooks, informational books, and poetry. For older children, teachers can offer picture books and chapter books, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

- **Room for five to six children:** This promotes the building of a community of readers who enjoy and discuss literature.

- **Two types of shelving:** Open shelves entice the reader by displaying attractive covers. Shelves with books displayed spine out offer the capability of providing more books using minimal space.

- **Literature-oriented displays and props:** Primary-grade children enjoy flannel boards, tapes related to books being read, stuffed animals, and puppets. Intermediate-grade children are attracted to an area that has book jackets, bulletin boards, and posters related to literature and reading.

- **Organized into categories:** Books can be categorized by genre, theme, topic, author, reading level, content area, or some combination of these features.

An observational study

Because a quality classroom library combats illiteracy by promoting voluntary reading, we wanted to find out if elementary school children have access to well-designed classroom libraries. To answer this question, we collected data in 183 regular education class-

rooms, Grades kindergarten through 5 (25 K classrooms, 31 Grade 1, 33 Grade 2, 32 Grade 3, 31 Grade 4, and 31 Grade 5), in 12 of the 14 public school districts in the metropolitan area of a large city in south Texas. Undergraduate preservice education students enrolled in a field-based course collected the data. The survey was, to a degree, informal in that the observers were not trained, classrooms were not randomly selected, and there was not a rigorous check on reliability. However, the observational instrument contained 16 items that were objective in nature and focused on observable, physical characteristics of the classrooms surveyed. The items were based on the nine characteristics discussed above that increase children's voluntary reading of books. Also, even though the classrooms were not randomly selected, the final sample contained diverse socioeconomic and ethnic populations representative of the metropolitan area. Therefore, we feel justified in saying that the observations provide an interesting snapshot of the state of classroom libraries in the area, a picture that merits the attention of the reading community.

The observational instrument was designed to obtain information necessary to answer three major questions:

- (1) Are trade books available in K-5 classrooms?
- (2) Are available books contained in a classroom library center?
- (3) Is the classroom library well designed?

The first two questions were answered by examining the percentage of classrooms that had or did not have trade books and libraries. To answer the third question, it was necessary to articulate the criteria by which the quality of a classroom library would be judged.

Criteria for assessing the quality of classroom libraries

In order to determine whether or not classroom libraries were well designed, we relied on the work of Morrow (Morrow, 1985; Morrow & Weinstein, 1982) and Routman (1991) discussed earlier, which provided the criteria for classifying libraries as basic, good, or excellent. In light of developmental differences in children across Grades K-5, we decided it was necessary to define the criteria for basic, good, and excellent libraries some-

what differently across grade levels. Therefore, we devised one set of criteria for Grades K-2 and a second set for Grades 3-5.

The criteria for a basic classroom library include the bare necessities to qualify as a classroom library. Even though the basic library is below desired expectations, it does allow children the opportunity to experience a classroom library, and it can be the foundation for building a library of high quality. A *basic K-2 library* was characterized as follows:

- contains at least one book per child
- is quiet and well lighted
- has seating or carpeting
- is large enough to accommodate a minimum of three children.

In addition to the criteria for a basic library, a *good K-2 library*:

- has at least four books per child
- can accommodate at least four children
- is partitioned from the rest of the room in some manner
- has an open-faced presentation of books.

Beyond the criteria just mentioned, an *excellent K-2 library*:

- contains at least eight books per child
- has some method of organizing the books
- has a flannel board or other props that promote reenactments or rereadings of books
- has a name
- is large enough for at least five children to use the area at one time.

For Grades 3 through 5, the criteria for the different classifications are as follows. A *basic 3-5 library*:

- contains at least one book per child
- is quiet and well lighted
- has carpeting or seating

- has sufficient room for at least three children.

In addition to the above basic criteria, a *good 3-5 library*:

- has at least four books per child
- comfortably accommodates at least four children
- offers privacy with partitions
- displays some of the books in an open-faced fashion
- has attractive book jackets, posters, or bulletin boards related to reading.

An *excellent 3-5 library* meets the previous criteria for a good library and goes beyond them to:

- have at least eight books per child
- organize the books in some manner
- name the area in some way
- comfortably accommodate at least five children.

What we found

After analyzing the observational data we generated the following findings, organized by our guiding research questions:

Are trade books available in classrooms?

Of the 183 classrooms in which data were collected, 162 had trade books available for children's use. In other words, 88.5% of all the classrooms contained children's trade books. This means, of course, that almost 12% of the total classrooms had no trade books available.

Are available books contained in a classroom library center? Of the total of 183 classrooms in which data were collected, 81 of them, or 44.3%, had library centers of some type: Floor space and shelving were devoted to a library. Thus, over half of the classrooms observed had no classroom library center. The number and percentage of classrooms with libraries at each grade level is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Number and percentage of classroom libraries at each grade

Grade level	Number of classrooms	Number of classrooms with library	Percentage of classrooms with library
K	25	18	72.0%
1	31	17	54.8%
2	33	17	51.5%
3	32	12	37.5%
4	31	9	29.0%
5	31	8	25.8%

Table 2
Number and percentage of basic, good, and excellent classroom libraries among the classrooms that had libraries

	K-2	3-5	Total K-5
Basic	48 (92.3%)	24 (82.8%)	72 (88.9%)
Good	2 (3.8%)	4 (13.8%)	6 (7.4%)
Excellent	2 (3.8%)	1 (3.4%)	3 (3.7%)

As can be seen, the percentage of classrooms with libraries is relatively high in kindergarten (almost three out of four kindergartens have libraries in the room); however, the percentage steadily decreases with each increasing grade level: By Grade 5 only 25.8% of the classrooms have libraries.

Is the classroom library center well designed? Table 2 summarizes the data on the quality of the libraries in the classrooms that actually had library centers. At both the K-2 and 3-5 levels, a majority of the library centers that did exist fell into the *basic* category. Of the 52 library centers at the K-2 grade levels, 48 (approximately 92% of the total) were categorized as *basic*. There were 2 *good* K-2 libraries (approximately 4% of the total) and 2 *excellent* ones (approximately 4% of the total). At Grades 3-5, 24 of the 29 library centers (approximately 83% of the total) were classified as *basic*, while 4 library centers (approximately 14% of the total) were identified as *good* classroom libraries, and 1 (approximately 3% of the total) was identified as *excellent*.

The need for excellent classroom libraries

Research of the past decade clearly links the importance of classroom libraries to children's increased literacy activities. In classrooms that contain well-designed library centers, children interact more with books, demonstrate more positive attitudes toward reading, choose reading as a leisure time activity, spend more time reading, and exhibit higher levels of reading achievement (Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1988). There is some room for joy in the findings of our observational study: The value of classroom libraries seems to have been accepted by kindergarten teachers; almost three fourths of the kindergarten teachers observed in this

study have established libraries in their classrooms. However, this figure drops off significantly in Grades 1 and 2 and is down to the point where fewer than one in three upper elementary grade classrooms contain a library. Furthermore, we found that the classroom library centers that did exist were, in large part, not particularly well designed. In fact, if we consider the total 183 classrooms observed, we see that only 4.8% or 10 classrooms had *good* or *excellent* libraries available to children.

The sample for this study was reasonably large and represented a wide cross section of classrooms in terms of socioeconomic and cultural factors. However, we do not claim that these findings are representative of the status of classroom libraries across the United States. Nevertheless, the results suggest room for improvement when it comes to using the potential power of classroom libraries in promoting voluntary reading habits among elementary school children.

Four portraits of excellent classroom libraries

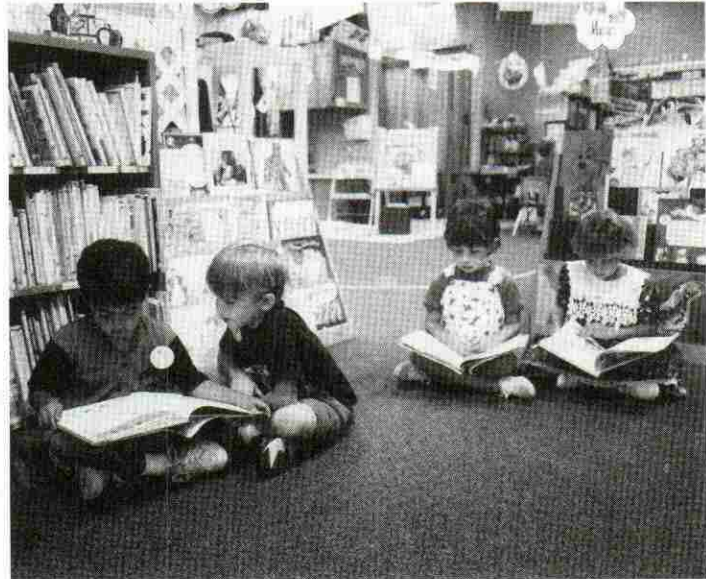
With this in mind, we would like to issue a call to action for teachers and school districts to commit their programs and resources to developing classroom libraries and to working cooperatively with school librarians so that opportunities for increasing children's voluntary reading habits will not be missed. To give a better idea of what we can strive for in our classrooms, we offer four portraits of excellent classroom libraries. The classrooms—two primary and two upper elementary—are in the greater San Antonio area, but their libraries serve as examples of the kinds of libraries that could be designed in any location. The photographs included with this article are only partially successful at conveying the overall presence of the libraries in the classroom and the intellectual and emotional

excitement associated with them. One notices these libraries immediately upon entering the classrooms. They are attractive, interesting places that draw adults and children alike.

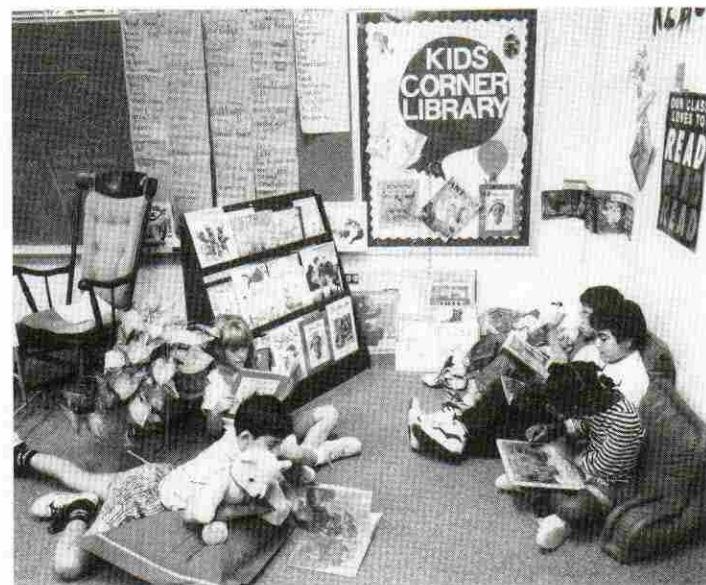
The first library, depicted in Photo 1, is in Cynthia Sloan's kindergarten classroom in a suburban, largely middle-class school. This library is set in one corner of the classroom and occupies approximately 15% of the total available floor space in the room. Between the bookshelves shown in the photograph and other shelves in the library, approximately 400 books are available to the 20 children in the class at any particular time. Ms. Sloan's collection contains about 1,500 more books that she circulates among the children and uses throughout the year. The library was named "The Book Nook" by the children and also contains a listening center, props that children use to recreate stories, a rocking chair, class-published books, videotapes, and puppets. "The children beg me to go to the classroom library," Ms. Sloan says. No wonder.

Photo 2 shows Marjorie Woodruff's Grade 2 classroom library. The group of children in this room are all considered to be "at risk" because they have experienced problems in learning to read. One of the first priorities for Ms. Woodruff upon starting the academic year in this school to which she had just transferred was to develop, in concert with the children, a classroom library. There were no bookshelves and few books in the classroom since this was a newly added second grade. Thus, this teacher brought her own handbuilt open-faced shelves to school, purchased two other shelves, and stocked the library with 170 books from her personal library. The students named their library "Kids' Corner Library." Classroom collections with multiple copies of appropriate trade books were ordered through the school for Ms. Woodruff's classroom library. Many features of this library lure happy children to find a favorite book and relax: a bulletin board with book jackets and author information, comfortable pillows, a basket of stuffed animals, a designated shelf of puppets, and an adjacent listening center.

Photo 3 is Jann Fractor's Grade 5 classroom. The school, a suburban, ethnically mixed one, opened just 3 weeks before this photograph was taken. New schools in the U.S. typically have little available in the way



Cynthia Sloan's kindergarten classroom library

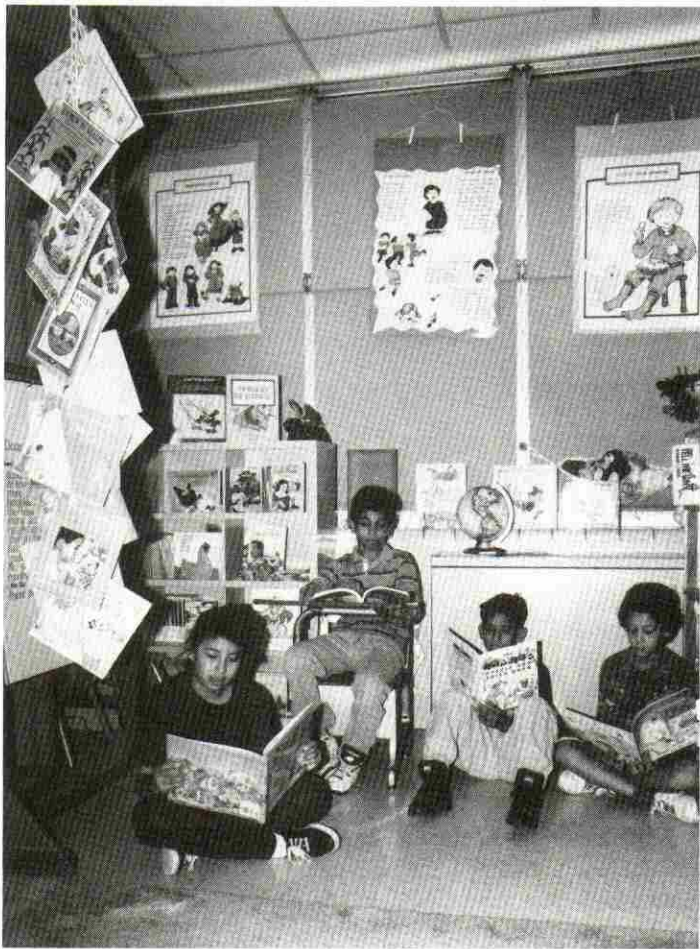


Marjorie Woodruff's second-grade classroom library

of furniture or other accoutrements; this school is no exception. No bookshelves were yet provided for teachers. The school had only a minimal central library because it was new. No provisions for making trade books or other materials available to teachers for their rooms were in place. Yet, because she is committed to the importance of a classroom library, Ms. Fractor had already gathered together a range of quality books. She also displayed books at-



Jann Fractor's fifth-grade classroom library



Laura Barrera's library—"Tierra de Fantasia"

tractively, provided a comfortable and interesting reading space, and had the children develop a literature-related display, all features of excellent design in classroom libraries.

The final library, shown in Photo 4, is in Laura Barrera's classroom. Her school is located in the midst of a housing project in an inner-city area. Almost 98% of the students at this school qualify for free or reduced lunch, and over 98% of the students are Latinos. The school has been working on developing literature-based reading instruction, with a special emphasis on the use of multicultural literature. Ms. Barrera's library—its name is "Tierra de Fantasia/Fantasy Land"—is a cornerstone of this thrust in her classroom. In addition to promoting voluntary reading with a good selection of quality books, comfortable seating, and movable bulletin boards for privacy, the library also reflects the teacher's emphasis on the integration of reading and writing. Writing materials and activities are part of the library, with one bulletin board being used as a message board, a place where children can leave all kinds of notes for each other, including messages about the books they have been reading. In short, this library, like the others pictured here, is a vital and important part of the classroom. For these teachers, the library is at the heart of everything that happens instructionally during the school day.

How can a teacher do this?

The specific design features that make classroom libraries places that attract children and promote their voluntary reading were listed and discussed above. The more of these features a teacher can include, the better. But if one can't do it all, where does one start? We believe that teachers should start constructing libraries by including books and open-faced displays of books; these are the two most important features to incorporate. In the following paragraphs we provide specific information about these two important components of libraries.

First, children need a variety of books from which to choose. Set a goal of at least four books per child in the classroom. More, of course, is better in this case. Our discussions to this point have emphasized physical

design features, but quantity is not the only important factor when it comes to books. The content and quality of the books themselves are crucial. High-quality children's literature is the foundation: Books must hold children's attention, and good authors and illustrators are the key to this goal. Also, books should be varied: Stories, informational books, poetry, and other appropriate genres should be present, and the collection should offer a range of difficulty levels so that all children will be appropriately challenged. A final and extremely important criterion for book selection is that books should reflect the cultural and ethnic diversity of society. Be sure to make the collection multicultural so that all children have ample opportunities to see themselves and members of local, national, and global communities in books.

Second, open-faced book displays really make a difference. In a week-long informal observational study (Martinez & Teale, 1989) conducted in a kindergarten classroom library, the books were arranged with both spines-outward and open-faced shelving. Over 90% of the books chosen by children were from the open-faced shelves. This is consistent with what bookstores do—they show the faces of books rather than the spines. Seeing the covers sells books better, and, in a way, that's what we're trying to do in building classroom libraries—sell kids on books.

Even accomplishing these two features—getting a classroom library with many diverse, high-quality books and incorporating open-faced shelving—may not be easy for teachers. Children's books are not cheap. What if you don't feel very well versed in multicultural literature? What if your school or district doesn't supply open-faced bookshelves? Creative schemes and financing are needed. Chalk trays or homemade shelving can provide open-faced displays. Local businesses and parents can be invited to contribute books to the classroom library. Book clubs can provide bonus points for free books. Teachers can get together and present a formal request to the appropriate administrators to ask that some portion of the school or district budget, currently used to purchase consumable materials like workbooks or materials for work sheets, be devoted to purchasing trade books for classrooms instead.

Conclusion

Clearly the need exists for high-quality classroom libraries in elementary schools. Why don't we see more libraries of the caliber of Cynthia Sloan's, Marjorie Woodruff's, Jann Fractor's, or Laura Barrera's? Perhaps we have not done an adequate job of informing teachers of the values of classroom library centers. Perhaps teachers cannot find enough support for their efforts to create quality library centers. Perhaps the development of voluntary reading habits is not enough of a priority in elementary school reading programs. Our research does not address the underlying causes of the widespread lack of quality classroom libraries that we found. But what we hope our findings highlight is the need for developing excellent classroom libraries. We hope our examples and discussion help educators see how this can be accomplished.

As we said earlier, we do not pretend that the photographs we have included with this article convey the dynamism and lure of the classroom libraries they represent. However, we hope that they give an idea of what quality classroom libraries look like, and what all classrooms should be striving to develop. With adequate attention to the importance of voluntary reading in school programs, we can go a long way toward realizing the goal of developing children who both *can* and *do* read. Classroom libraries provide the vehicle for achieving this goal.

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