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Christy Lao
San Francisco State University

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Why Teachers Buy Books for their Students

Christy Lao
San Francisco State
University

Results of this study confirm the paucity of books in classroom libraries and the insufficient school funding for the classroom library. A sample of New York City teachers reported that they spent an average of \$378 of their own money on classroom library books, and received an average of \$143 from the school each year for books and supplies. Teachers listed a variety of reasons for their willingness to buy books. The significance of this study is the demonstration that teachers believe in the importance of books, and they practice what they believe by bringing books into students' lives.

“FEW OF US QUESTION that books are staples in a learner’s diet. How can it be, then, that every classroom in America doesn’t have a rich library? Why are so many teachers put in the awkward position of spending hundreds of their own dollars on books? Why are we forced to hoard points from our children’s book club purchase?” (Calkins, 2001, pp.31-32)

It is common knowledge that books are important for children’s literacy development. However, teachers and students are not supplied with sufficient books in their classroom.

Book crisis

These days, students are facing increasingly complex literacy demands. Nevertheless, supplying books to teachers and students remains low on many schools’ priority lists. The book budget for New York City school libraries is \$4 per student (Ohanian, 2000). The serious lack of books and how it affects children’s literacy development is well documented (Krashen, 1999; McQuillan, 1998).

Well-designed classroom libraries encourage more reading

Overwhelming evidence indicates that children read more and better when they have more access to books (Elley, 1989; Krashen, 1999; McQuillan, 1998). The classroom library, where books are most easily accessible to all children in the classroom, plays a vital role in providing children immediate access to books. Bissett (1969) found that children in classrooms with book collections read 50 percent more than did children without. Morrow (1991) and Morrow and Weinstein (1982) also found that well designed classroom libraries resulted in more voluntary use of books. Brassell (1999) described how a class of second graders created a library in six weeks - the number of books increased from 78 to 403, student reading increased from 198 to 370 books, and a passion for books developed that was not seen in other classrooms.

More reading leads to better reading

Other evidence also indicates that the more children read, the better they read and the greater their literacy development is. This assertion comes from studies of in-school free reading (Krashen, 2001), case histories (Krashen, 1993), and studies showing increments in vocabulary knowledge after brief exposures to meaningful text (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985).

If access to more books through better classroom library collections leads to more reading, and more reading leads to more literacy development, better libraries should result in more literacy development. This has been demonstrated to be the case for school libraries (Elley, 1992; Lance, Welborn, and Hamilton-Pennell, 1993) and for the number of books available in both the school and classroom libraries (Froese, 1997).

Money for classroom libraries

The importance of access to books is widely acknowledged, and the role that the classroom library plays in providing children the easiest and most immediate access to print is also widely recognized. Yet, a fundamental question remains: Why do teachers purchase books for their classroom libraries with their own funds?

Overall, teachers spent a good deal of their own money in purchasing books for their classroom libraries. According to a Washington Post report (Mathews, 2001), a 1996 National Education Association survey revealed that teachers spend an average of \$408 of their own money on their students each year. Minority teachers, who usually work in more needy schools but earn lower salaries, spend \$454 on average per year. A nationwide study of elementary school teachers' buying patterns and preferences, conducted by Quality Education Data, Inc. (2002), a market research firm in Denver, found that typical K-8 teachers spend \$520 and new K-8 teachers spend \$700 on books and supplies for the classrooms each year. According to the survey results reported in National Post (Vallis, 2002), 79 percent of teachers in Canada use their own funds to buy books.

Much of these teacher expenditures appear to go to the classroom library. In a survey of schools in New York, Allington, Guice, Baker, Michaelson, and Li (1995) found that classrooms with the largest book collections were those in which teachers bought most of the books. Guice, Allington, Johnston, Baker, and Michaleson (1996) also found that 40 percent of the teachers teaching in economically disadvantaged areas in New York State reported that they purchased most of the books in their classroom libraries.

Objective

The purpose of this study is to determine how much money teachers are spending on classroom libraries, and their reasons for these expenditures.

Subjects

Subjects in this study were a sample of convenience. I surveyed one hundred and forty six teachers attending a literacy workshop held at a graduate school of education in New York City. Attendance at the literacy workshop is required as part of professional development. Most of the teachers (81 percent) taught at elementary schools while 19 percent of the participants were middle and high school ESL or bilingual teachers. Seventy-four percent of these teachers taught at low-income urban schools, 22 percent in middle class urban schools and 4 percent in upper middle class urban schools.

Methods

I developed a survey with 10 questions (see Appendix). The participants filled out a short questionnaire, asking if they had a classroom library, had sufficient books in their classroom library, and whether they were given a budget for classroom library. In addition, I asked participants to estimate the number of books in their classroom library, the funding they received for their classroom library, and the amount of money they spent buying books for their students. I used qualitative coding procedures to analyze the open-ended questions on the reasons teachers spent their own money on books for their students. I

coded each response first with conceptual labels to capture the nature of the comments made by the participants; then, I grouped those labeled segments under thematic categories. I then organized those themes into the broader major categories of information presented in the section on reasons teachers buy books for their students.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1 illustrates that 127 of these teachers reported having a classroom library while 15 did not. These 15 teachers identified themselves as pullout ESL teachers who did not have a classroom, or bilingual teachers who taught in the child's primary language.

Table 1

Responses to classroom library, its collection, and its funding

Questions	Number of responses			
	Yes		No	
	number	percent	number	percent
Have classroom library	127	87	15	10
Have sufficient books in classroom library (out of 127 having classroom library)	49 (See remark)	39	71	56
Given budget for classroom library	42	29	95	65
Spent own money in purchasing books for their students	133	91	9	6

Remark: The number of books in the classroom considered to be sufficient by the 49 teachers with "sufficient" collections is distributed as follows:

Number of books:	< 100	101-200	201-400	401-600	601-800	801-1000	>1000
Number of teachers:	12	11	16	2	3	2	3

How many books are sufficient in a classroom library?

As shown in Table 1, out of the 127 teachers having a classroom library, 71 teachers reported that they did not have a sufficient number of

books, while 49 reported that they had enough books for all students in their class, (Note that for this as well as other questions, not all respondents answered every question). As shown in Table 2, seventy-nine (or 62 percent) teachers reported having less than 200 books and three (or 2.4 percent) teachers responded having more than 1,000 books in their classroom library.

Table 2

Estimated number of books from teachers who reported having a classroom library

Estimated number of books in classroom library	Number of responses	
	number	percent
Less than 100	44	34.6
101-200	35	27.6
201-400	35	27.6
401-600	5	4.0
601-800	3	2.4
801-1,000	2	1.4
More than 1,000	3	2.4

Allington and Cunningham (2002) suggest that primary-grade classrooms should have between 700 and 750 titles and upper-grade should have 400 titles. Huck et al. (1993) recommended that classroom libraries should have at least 300 titles as part of a permanent collection with supplementation from a well-stocked school library. More than half of the classroom libraries in this study did not meet this requirement as illustrated in Table 2. Interestingly, almost half of those (twenty-three out of the forty-nine) who reported having sufficient books had no more than 200 books in their classroom. (See remark in Table 1).

Of the two who reported having between 801 and 1000 books, one was teaching a second grade bilingual class at a low-income urban school and did not have a budget for books. This teacher purchased all classroom library books for her class herself, both English and Spanish. Interestingly, the other teacher who reported having between 801 and 1,000 books worked in a middle class urban school and was given a very

generous budget, more than \$2,000 per year for books. Nevertheless, she spent her own money, buying books for classroom use and giving them to students as presents. The majority of the participants indicated that most of their classroom library collection consisted of books they purchased with their own funds.

School funding versus teachers' personal resources

The majority of the teachers (65 percent) indicated that they were not given a budget for their classroom library (see Table 1). Even though 29 percent of the teachers reported having a budget, funding given for both supplies and books was far from sufficient. As shown in Table 3, six teachers (4 percent) indicated that they received funding but that it was less than \$100 while twenty-one teachers (14 percent) reported having \$101-500 per year for books and supplies. Several teachers who reported receiving funding from school mentioned that they did not get this book/supply funding yearly.

One hundred thirty three respondents (91 percent) indicated that they used their own money to buy books for their students (see Table 1), even though only 127 of them had a classroom library. Only nine (6 percent) said they did not spend their own money on books. The amount of money teachers spent out of their own pockets ranged from \$100 to up to \$2,500 per year.

Six novice teachers reported spending at least \$1,000 during their first year of teaching. One teacher wrote, "Even before I started teaching I knew that I was going to have difficulties obtaining books from the school so I started buying my own. Little by little as school has progressed, I have spent money on books from every one of my paychecks." Those who have been in the profession for many years tended to spend less on books: "I spend less each year because my library is growing."

Some respondents wanted to buy books, but were not able to do so. As one respondent wrote: "I did it for the first three months, then I couldn't afford it." Some teachers brought their personal books from home: "I do not have extra money. I buy books for my own children and bring to school what they no longer want."

Table 3 presents details on school funding and the amount teachers spent on classroom libraries. From these data, we can estimate that, on average, teachers spent \$378 on books and received only \$143 (funding for both books and supplies) from the school each year.

Table 3

Comparison of school funding and teacher personal funding on classroom library collection

Amount of Money	Distribution of School Funding		Distribution of Teacher Personal Funding	
	number	percent	number	percent
\$0	95	65	9	6
less than \$100	6	4.1	21	14
\$101-\$500	21	14.4	82	56
\$501-\$1,000	9	6.2	23	16
\$1,001-\$1,500	3	2.1	1	0.7
\$1,501-\$2,000	0	0	5	3
\$2,001-\$2,500	1	0.7	0	0

Reasons teachers buy books for their students

I also asked teachers why they spent their own money buying books for their students. They gave several overlapping reasons.

Not enough books in the classroom library

All teachers responded that they simply did not have enough books in the classroom. Typical responses included: "I do it because I do not have enough books in my classroom for all my students to read;" "If I don't, I'd have nothing for my students." The majority of the participants reported that most of the books in their classroom were old and insufficient, and that they wanted to provide students with a variety of books to choose from and ample exposure to all genres. They needed multiple copies to use in book clubs and for students to take home. They wanted their students to have good books to read and wanted to have an inviting classroom library: "It is important to me to have a rich library

with variations of books. The more books my children see the more excited they get. When I introduce them to new books their eyes light up and all you hear is YEAH and OHHH. I love to see them excited about literacy. The more exposure they have to books the more they will like it and the more they will read and the better they will get at it.”

No books at home

“Reading is important and my students do not get access to books at home.” The majority of teachers surveyed in this study (74 percent) taught in low-income communities where books were rarely available at home. “I buy my students books because they are already underprivileged and [I] feel that book is a necessity.” These responses are consistent with Feitelson and Goldstein’s (1986) findings that 60 percent of the kindergartners in neighborhoods where children did not do well in school did not own a single book. Neuman (1999) also found that school and public libraries in low-income communities tend to be of poor quality.

One teacher reported, “My students like me to purchase books and they like to have adults read to them. If I did not buy books for my classroom library, they would not have access to storybooks. Many of my students do not have books at home and the parents do not take them to the library.” As discussed in Constantino’s (1995) study, many language minority parents have little knowledge about libraries and seldom take their children to the library.

Limited or no budget for books

The majority of the teachers (65 percent) surveyed were not given a budget for their classroom library and teachers felt the need for additional books for their daily teaching: “The school does not provide enough trade books, I need the books for my students and myself for the curriculum.” “There is no steady and permanent amount of money for the library. Even if we get funds, it comes too late in the year. Buying my own books is easier than constantly requesting books and getting turned down or put on hold.” Teachers discovered that the easiest way to solve this problem is to buy books from out of their own pocket: “I can’t

be limited only to what budget allows.” “I feel since the school does not give us the resources, we must find an alternative to provide resources for our children.”

Provide students a wide variety of books

Teachers wanted to provide their students with a wide variety of books “to have something for every child that comes through my classroom and to keep them interested in reading.” Teachers reported that what they purchased were picture books, folktales, fairy tales, poetry, fiction and nonfiction, and biographies due to the limited availability of these books at school. One teacher said, “I want my student to get exposed to all types of books - good literature! The final outcome is a reward to me - my students will be exposed to fine quality good books even if it comes out of my own pocket.”

One teacher claimed, “As a teacher the greatest legacy I can leave my students is that of a love for reading. This can only be achieved by providing them with the actual literature. They must be exposed to the current and past literary giants so they can read, read; read.” Another wrote that it was important “to provide books with literary language instead of basal readers.”

Also, due to the changing demographics in the classroom, teachers felt it important to include reading materials relevant to the student population: “Students need books in their levels and interest, and books that they can associate with;” “Books that are given to my class are not relevant to the population that I teach. Therefore, I have to explore and purchase my own materials. To purchase books that children are able to identify with.”

Some teachers also identified the need of introducing students to multicultural literature: “to introduce the students to multicultural authors, to expand students’ awareness of their culture and authors from their homelands;” “...(buying books) is the only way I can have a library that reflects the children I teach.”

Ownership

Several teachers pointed out the importance of children having their own books. An ESL teacher who has taught K-5 for fifteen years at a low-income urban school explained “I buy books for my students because it is important that they have books of their own at home. I enjoy giving them gifts. It encourages them to read and enjoy independent reading.”

For the curriculum

Several teachers indicated that they purchased books to meet the specific needs and specific reading level of their students, “to help them read books on their level.”

Some teachers also mentioned that they needed the books to plan their curriculum and do the lessons: “As I plan my curriculum, I need certain books that are paramount to my lesson.” And “at times, I will need specific books for a lesson and they may not be available.”

Teachers all said that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to teach without good literature: “In order for students to love reading, and learn how to read they need to be immersed in a classroom with books, lots of books.”

Updating reading materials

Many teachers mentioned that books in their classroom libraries were old: “I believe my students need to read current titles.” Another teacher wrote: “I feel that I need good texts as models for my students for good reading and writing. New books are always coming out that appeal to the interest of the readers and writers in my room.” In a study of an urban school library collection, Allington and Cunningham (2002) found that two-thirds of the school library books were purchased prior to 1975 and were more than 25 years old, including the informational and reference texts. Guice et al.(1996) also found that school libraries they studied were stocked with many out-of-date books, published in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The California Department of Education

(2002) reported that in 2000 the average copyright date of books in California school libraries was 1982.

Need for books in the students' native languages

Most bilingual teachers indicated an urgent need for native language materials: "They are too difficult to find and too expensive in the catalogue," "They are not easy to come by. If I see something I get it and I don't have to wait for all the bureaucracy to purchase a book and besides, no money is available;" "I purchase books both in English and Spanish but I tend to spend more on Spanish books because they are so limited. I always purchase books when I travel to Latin American countries."

A teacher teaching high school Spanish said, "I need materials to teach Spanish literature, because what the school gets is very poor for the most part. I refuse to use a translation from another language when so much good Spanish literature exists."

Another teacher put it differently: "Many times, I cannot buy books in Spanish at a reasonable price. Therefore, I buy them in English (I translate them to Spanish for reading to the students). I buy all types of genres so that my students can appreciate all types of literature."

These teachers understand the importance of developing primary language literacy as the most efficient means of developing English as a second language (Cummins 1981). They felt the urgency and importance of supplying their children with native language books. According to a study conducted by Ramirez, Yuen, Ramey, and Pasta (1991) the average Spanish speaking family with limited English proficient children attending school has only 26 books. Pucci (1994) reported that school libraries in schools she investigated with Spanish bilingual programs had approximately one book in Spanish per child.

Sending students the message: books are important

Many teachers mentioned their passion for reading and sharing: "I am a lover of books. I am always looking for books that will excite my

children and will match their passions and interests;" "I spend my own money because I love books and my children love to read too." One teacher mentioned that it was very important to let students know why teachers buy books for them: "I spent my own money because I didn't have enough of a budget from the school and having my students read daily was essential to me. I wanted them to understand that I wasn't just 'preaching' about the importance of books but I wanted them to actually see that I thought it was so important that they read that I was willing to spend my own money to get them adequate reading material. They really responded to this. They were great kids and were so appreciative of the fact that I would buy books for them to read. They understood that I was making the sacrifice and really reacted positively to it."

Conclusions

Results of this study reveal that teachers spend an average of \$378 of their own money per year on classroom library books. It also confirms the suspected paucity of books in classroom libraries. The various reasons for spending personal money on students all point to one common underlying factor: there is an insufficient amount of books available to students in the classroom, and schools do not provide ample resources for developmentally appropriate classroom libraries. Although some schools did provide their teachers funding for book purchasing, the amount of money was generally insignificant. Limited resources can and do serve as powerful constraints on literacy activities. Numerous research shows that better libraries are related to better reading achievement. And, for many linguistic and economically disadvantaged children, school is the most likely source of books. The International Reading Association's (2000) position statement addresses this important issue for classroom libraries that at least seven high-quality books per child should be ensured.

It is therefore recommended that school and school districts should place a higher priority on funding the purchase of books for teachers' classroom libraries. It is the dissatisfaction with their classroom library collection that motivated teachers to spend their own money to stock their classroom library. Administrators and policy makers should, at least, acknowledge teachers' commitment and recognize teachers for

their generous spirit, for their time, and the effort they devote to their students. Teachers should not be taken for granted and should be provided with increased financial support for their pedagogical needs. Teachers should not spend their own money for classroom purposes.

It must be emphasized that recommending more books for classroom libraries does not entail a huge commitment: for the price of one or two computers, a classroom library collection can be significantly enhanced. Moreover, the computers will soon be obsolete, but the books can last for decades.

Furthermore, it is the teacher's understanding of the importance of books in children's literacy development, the urgent need of providing students with sufficient good quality books, and of cultivating the students' love for reading that motivates them to provide, voluntarily, a diverse selection of interesting, quality books for their students. If teachers did not recognize the importance of books in children's lives, they would not sacrifice to purchase books for their students, spending their own money, despite the modest salaries they earn.

Most importantly, it is the teacher's unfaltering dedication to their students and profession that motivates them to go well beyond their regular responsibilities to provide their students with books. The most significant finding of this study, perhaps, is the confirmation of teachers' unwavering commitment to children, their contagious love of books, and the fact that they practice what they believe by bringing books into students' lives.

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Christy Lao is a faculty member at San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA.

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Appendix

Survey

Why Teachers buy books for their students

The purpose of this survey is to find out why teachers spend their own money buying books for their students and who contribute to the collection of classroom library. All data acquired from this survey will be kept confidential and used for this research only. Thank you for your support for this research!

1. What kind of school are you working in?
 - a. low income urban school
 - b. middle class urban school
 - c. upper middle class urban
2. What grade and subject are you currently teaching?
3. Do you have a class library? a. Yes b. No
4. Does your classroom library have sufficient books for all your students? a. Yes b. No

If yes, how many books do you have in your classroom library?
 - a. less than 100 b. 101-200 c. 201-400 d. 401-600
 - e. 601-800 f. 801-1,000 g. more than 1,000
5. Are you given a budget for your classroom library?
 - a. Yes b. No
6. If yes, how much funding for classroom library do you usually receive per year?
 - a. less than \$100 b. \$101-500
 - c. \$501-\$1,000 d. \$1,001-\$1,500 e. 1,5001-2,000
 - f. \$2,000 –\$2,500
7. Do you use your own money to buy books for your students?
 - a. Yes b. No

8. If yes, how much do you usually spend per year?
 - a. less than \$100
 - b. \$101-\$500
 - c. \$501-\$1,000
 - d. \$1,001-\$1,500
 - e. \$1,501-\$2,000
 - f. \$2,000 –\$2,500
9. Why do you spend your own money buying books for your students?
10. What kind of book do you usually purchase (genre and language)? Why?