

Debbie Kim

I loved reading as a child and teenager, but it wasn't until recently that I realized how much an individual's love of reading is carefully cultivated by a community of other readers. Teachers and librarians encouraged me to discover my own taste in books, and so, as a high school English teacher, I hope to do the same for my students and give the choice, time, and exposure for each one of them to find their own paths in long and rewarding reading journeys.

This wasn't the case when I first started teaching in Los Angeles and was determined to make all of my 12th graders into readers through the choices that I made for whole-class instruction. When this method only worked for a handful of students but not the majority, I committed to changing my practice. Over the last three years, I've witnessed how much more transformative a robust classroom library and dedicated independent reading time can be, far more than just directing students to my favorite books. To start, I began expanding my own reading horizons to include young adult books and started adding titles to my classroom collection when I found quality works that would connect to our student population and feature contemporary touchstones and issues. This past year, when a reluctant reader told me he was interested in a career helping teenagers and their mental health, I was able to show him multiple options that he could choose from. Another student in my AP English Literature class devoured one graphic novel after another, plucking the next library addition from my hands as soon as I brought it to school. Their increasing passion for reading was infectious. Students recommended their favorite horror story collection to their friends and asked each other questions about what they thought would follow a cliffhanger. One student proudly announced to the whole class that he had finished *The Mazerunner*, the first book he finished reading on his own.

It is now abundantly clear to me that when my students can hear their voices and see their passions in the books they choose to read, their interest in reading organically grows. Now we read regularly in class, every day, and I make space for reflection and conversation to help keep the momentum going. Students talk to each other about what they are reading about and what they think of the reading, and they also conference with me to highlight specific aspects of their texts. Through all of this, I've come to see that I didn't need to be the center of my students' reading lives, that in fact, cheering and celebrating their individuality from the sidelines was my role all along. It is all the more exciting to partner with the Book Love Foundation, which makes it possible to provide an extensive library that is as diverse, colorful, and interesting as my students. By giving teens the tools to cultivate their unique interests, our learning and reading community is finally flourishing on its own terms.