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I grew up in a family of readers. It wasn't unusual to climb into the backseat of my mom's car after dance class only to startle my mom because she was so caught up in her book. My dad rode the train to and from downtown Chicago from the suburbs every day and would read books on his Kindle to pass the time. My brother, sister and I had a fantastic home library. We used to terrorize each other with the cover of my dad's book- "Misery" by Stephen King.

It wasn't until I became a teacher that I realized how blessed I was to come from a home that celebrated reading. Building an extensive classroom library became a priority as a first year teacher.

My district used a reading leveling system that depended on students reading at their independent reading level for an hour a day. The students would take books home and bring them back per day with a signed reading log. This meant that many books went missing or were damaged daily.

In order to fill my library, I had to get creative and got really good at finding books. I would buy books from garage sales, library book sales, and warehouse sales. I wanted to provide my students with books that interested them.

I received my masters in reading through Concordia University of Chicago in 2017. Throughout the program, I had the opportunity to study the reading habits of my students more carefully. I began to notice that too few of the books in my library reflected the lives and experiences of the students reading them. They deserved better.

As I learned more, I started to become pickier about the books I allowed in my library. Did they reflect the lives and experiences of the students reading them? Did they provide relevant information? Did the students actually pick up the books?

With these thoughts in mind, I started my journey to update my classroom library. This year, I removed any informational books written before 2003. I took notice of the biographies I had in my classroom and recognized a lack of diversity. I had students pick out the books they wouldn't really want to read. Finally, I asked for a wish list. My students responded with such joy! They took ownership over the library, worked to create new bins, and began reading books that truly interested them. I'd observe one student finishing a book, standing up, and walking the book over to a friend.

"You have GOT to read this!" they would whisper to one another. It made my reading heart so happy. They even began their own podcast about reading! The podcast, titled "We Talk About Books Here," is student created and produced. You can find us on Spotify, Pandora, and Amazon!

Book Love Foundation's grant is providing me with the funds necessary to update my library and fulfil the wish list of my students. I am truly grateful!

