

## Lucy Calkins Classroom Libraries Video Interview Transcript

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**Question:** *How were the books in the middle grades Libraries selected?*

**Mary Ehrenworth:** I'd like to talk to you a little bit about the middle school classroom libraries. If you're a middle school teacher, you have somewhere between 60 and 200 kids, right? It's pretty hard to know all your kids as readers even though that's of course your biggest goal. And it's also pretty hard as a middle school teacher to stay on top of all the new literature for kids. When I first got into middle school reading, which is almost 20 years ago, I had read pretty much every book that was out there. But that's because there weren't that many. We're talking about days when it was *Anne of Green Gables* to *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* to *Johnny Tremain*. And now, since Harry Potter, since *The Hunger Games*, the influx of fantastic kid books for kids, there are thousands and thousands of books. You'll know a lot of them, but there are going to be books that you don't know. When you're a middle school teacher, there's nothing more terrifying than having a parent call you and say, "so this book that you gave my child" and then realizing you didn't read it and you don't know what's on page 74. And it might be something that actually is really problematic.

So let me tell you a little bit about the middle school libraries. One thing that the middle school team, (Heather Michael, Katy Wischow, Kate Roberts, Audra Robb, Cornelius Minor, and I) is that we all care a ton about issues of representation and issues of equity. So when we think about that, one of the things we care about is that there are middle school kids all around the country that could've become readers, but nobody gave them books. And the truth is, that's the first thing that you need: a ton of kids. If they had access to books, they would become readers. Dick Ellington says that the biggest thing you need is access to books that they find fascinating. Listen to the pronoun. Not "we," but "they." That *they* find fascinating. So, the first thing that we thought about was making sure that kids have access to the best books that are out there for teens.

We also wanted to make sure to avoid what sometimes happens by eighth grade, which is that the kids feel like they've read every book in the classroom library, and actually it's kind of true. When *The Hunger Games* came out, that was marketed originally as a book for ninth grade. A lot of kids die in that book. It's an amazing book, but now you see fifth graders reading it. It was never intended for that, but now they've read it. So now that means that when you get to an eighth grade, kids aren't looking for *The Hunger Games* anymore. Instead, they want to know "if I loved *The Hunger Games*, what other dystopian series are there?" And fortunately, there are a lot of really good ones. So part of what we tried to do, and it was a huge endeavor and I think sort of a miracle to pull it off, is that between sixth grade and seventh grade and eighth grade there's hardly a title that's duplicated. So this notion that if you've got kids and they're in the sixth grade library and then they come to

seventh grade and you get the seventh grade library, it's not the same books. It's like oh, you grew these readers, they're ready for this next step. And that takes a huge amount of reading. We were reading everyday. We had people reading all over the country. And so that's the first thing is to know that the amount of duplication is remarkably low. Almost nil between sixth grade, seventh grade, and eighth grade. Another thing we were concerned about is volume. As kids become readers they do actually read through the books and so having new books at every year matters.

The second thing we were interested in is representation. As teens, kids are growing into their identities and those identities are complicated and they're just getting to know them. As a result, you need to make sure that you've got kids of mixed race, kids who are coming out, kids who live in conditions of poverty, kids who live in conditions of affluence, kids who feel academic pressure, kids who feel pressure from sports, kids who feel like they're bullied, kids who feel like they're caught up with bullies—all of those urgent teen social issues that are shaping their identities. We wanted to make sure that kids would see themselves in those libraries. And frankly, that's not really true in a lot of schools. At a lot of schools, the books still reflect a country that doesn't exist anymore. And it's really important that kids who we're bringing up and are going to inherit this country see themselves in the libraries. So know that this topic was a really big issue.

And then as we did this, we also had to read and make sure that the books in there wouldn't get you fired. Some of you teach in fairly conservative places and we at the Teachers College don't. We live in New York for a reason. We work for a university for a reason and that's because we care about issues of diversity and representation. And we wanted to make sure that you wouldn't suddenly get to page seven and find that there's explicit sex. Those kids are going to go to high school, they're going to get books where there's more explicitness in them, so we really looked for is a breadth and generosity of representation while still thinking that the kids are twelve and thirteen and fourteen. So they're not high school libraries, they're middle school libraries. Would a lot of high school kids enjoy these books? Yes, but we were thinking about the fact that these kids are preteens and teens, they're not seventeen and eighteen yet.

Regarding representation, here's an example of representation in a dystopian book. *Ember in the Ashes* represents dystopian literature. So much dystopian literature has very actual little representation in it, but in this book there are all different kinds of representation and all different kinds of identity struggles that kids are going through, besides the dystopian narrative. So that's a really powerful book for different kinds of kids to read around the country. Or we might take Kwame Alexander's new book *The Crossover*, which is this amazing book that's about basketball, but is also a coming-of-age book concerned with masculinity as a young man of color. When we think about representation, those are the kinds of stories we looked for.

And then a third thing that we thought about with the middle school libraries is this notion of the libraries themselves acting as mentors for the kids. So that if a kid finds a book they'll be a clear through line to other books like those. And it could be that it's related along a theme or a topic, it could be it's related by an author, it could be it's related by a genre, but that notion that when readers become powerful readers, they go on. They find an author, they keep going with that author. They find a genre, they keep going with that genre. So we wanted to make it easy for kids to do that.

There's one more thing that you should know about the middle school libraries and that is we were really concerned about research like Nell Duke's research that showed that kids in high school and college are dropping out of the hard majors and the single biggest reason they drop out is because the nonfiction gets too hard for them. And teen and even kids in their early twenties don't come home and tell their parents "you know I really was interested in genetics, but I found the nonfiction a little hard." They come home and they say "I don't like that teacher" or "I don't like that course." Know that when kids say I don't like something, it's code for "I find this hard." So we were really concerned with getting kids to read nonfiction and not just little snippets of nonfiction. And not poor quality Xeroxed articles, but whole nonfiction books. So you will see a couple different kinds of that. An example of this is, if you end up getting the historical fiction bookshelves, which are designed for book clubs in historic fiction, you will see that there are parallel nonfiction books so kids could do research to accompany their historic fiction reading. If you end up doing a good argument unit, there's a lot of nonfiction in here that's the same topic, but different perspectives. And then finally, there are fantastic nonfiction books now for kids. And so some of them are things like *Omnivore Dilemmas*, but it's the teen version. Or *Boys in the Boat*, the teen version or other nonfiction that was written by fantastic kids' authors for kids.

When we think about nonfiction, we're also thinking about getting kids interested in nonfiction in a couple different ways. One series in here, which is the Temeraire series by Naomi Novik, is really fascinating. It's the new genre of historic fantasy so it's set during the Napoleonic Wars, and Novik looks at how did Napoleon move his troops so quickly. So it's a young officer in Napoleon's troops and the premise that she comes up with is dragons. That's how he moved his troops so quickly. So it's a series that gets kids incredibly interested in the Napoleonic Wars. Actually, even as an adult you probably want to read this series, it's really fun. And it gets into the interests that they already have in dragons, and at the same time it builds interest into that whole nonfiction topic. Then we have a whole bookshelf of nonfiction and historic fiction just on war that looks at wars over the centuries and wars now and the issues that come up in that and coming of age during war. And you can find a shelf on that. There are a lot of books for teens that take great nonfiction for adults and then make a kids book out of it. So things like *Omnivore's Dilemma* for teens, which, frankly, I have to say I think the teen version is even better than the adult version. In the teen version there are all these really interesting charts and diagrams and we're trying to teach kids to read harder nonfiction, by teaching them to work

with harder charts and diagrams, so it's really interesting and useful. Or *Chew on This*, which is the teen version of Fast Food Nation. So things like that where we got a whole bunch of nonfiction to get kids to read actual books. I think the libraries are going to be transformative. I think they're transformative for kids, but frankly, I think they're also transformative for teachers because to stay abreast of all the new books, that's almost impossible. So to have people who are giving their lives to that, that's a really huge gift and I'm really grateful to all the readers and I think it's going to be a great gift for you too.

*To learn more about the TCRWP Classroom Libraries, browse representative titles, and order shelves, visit [calkinslibraries.com](http://calkinslibraries.com)*