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# Teachers Share Tips for Curating Classroom Libraries

By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 27, 2023

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Curating a classroom library today can be a literal challenge. Case in point: the growing number of states that are not only banning, restricting, and reviewing titles in their public and school libraries, but also in classroom libraries. In Florida and other states, classroom teachers are at risk of incurring hefty fines and possible jail time if they don't comply with the new classroom library state mandates. We spoke with three teachers, including one in Northeast Florida, about the ways they curate their classroom libraries to enhance curriculum, to supplement their school libraries' collections, and to change their students' lives one book at a time.

**Andrea** (last name not listed due to safety concerns) from Northeast Florida is a fifth-grade language arts and social studies teacher in a district where teachers' classroom libraries are under a microscope. In addition, the district's media specialists are spending countless hours inventorying teachers' classroom collections to make sure the shelves do not include books under question.

Recently, there were two titles under scrutiny in Andrea's grade level. They were a former Sunshine State Young Reader Award Winner, *Black Brother*, *Black Brother* by Jewell Parker Rhodes, and a title in the Who Was biography series: *Who Was Michael Jackson?* They have since been put back on the shelves.

While Andrea says that removing these titles did not harm her students per se, those in the district's upper grades won't be so lucky. "It will ultimately hurt kids in middle and high school," Andrea said. "They should be able to find books that resonate with them, and that help them with whatever they may be dealing with in their lives."



Two titles that were recently challenged in Northeast Florida.

Andrea wonders why Florida's governor is questioning teachers' authority and expertise in choosing books for their classroom libraries and students. "I'm not sure why he has chosen teachers as an outlet for everything," Andrea said. "I'd like to know, what did a teacher ever do to him?"

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wide variety of categories including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, graphic novels, and others. "I make sure to have favorite books that I have read and other kids have loved, so I can recommend titles if/when students are struggling to locate something."

With her inventoried shelves of books alphabetically organized by author with color-coded labels, two-week due dates, and rotating student librarians to keep books circulating, her students can get closer to finding the book that will change everything. "My system—especially the student librarians and due dates—prevents a book from dying in a kid's cubby, and no one else getting to read it," Andrea said.

Her hopes are that with the books they choose along with the ones they read in her novel studies and book clubs, her kids will become life-long readers. "We're trying to help them become thinkers—by thinking about what they read—and this will translate to their writing, too." Andrea said. "I love working with kids at this level. They can debate, do all kinds of projects, and are developing higher thinking skills."

**Willeena Booker** loves books and reading so much that she traded in her health educator position (she traveled throughout the Philadelphia School District teaching health programs at schools) to get her teaching certificate to teach first grade. But that wasn't always the case. "I didn't love reading as a kid, and struggled with it until I was in sixth grade," Booker said. "Part of it was that I had no connection to books that I read because I didn't see myself, my family, people who looked like me, or diverse cultures or groups."

Fortunately for Booker's first graders at Hallowell Elementary School in Horsham, Pa., she's not letting history repeat itself. Today, she teaches them to read—and to love reading—with a carefully curated classroom library overflowing with diverse books. "I must choose books that are representative of my diverse students," Booker said, "to support the concepts of mirrors, windows, and sliding doors to allow my students to see themselves—and to affirm others."

But Andrea feels that if there is any question whether a child should read a particular title that it should be a parenting decision, not a school district or state one. "If you don't want your children reading a book, that's fine. But you can't tell other kids—or a whole state of kids—that they can't read something."

She believes a greater threat to students is internet access, which parents should focus their attention on. "We shouldn't be banning books, if we're not blocking the internet and social media," Andrea said. "Kids are more likely to find questionable content online than they are in books."

Protests and legal challenges aside, Andrea must do what she believes is right for her students' ELA needs. She runs her classroom library much like a regular library, mindfully choosing books at different levels and genres.

"I like to pick a variety of levels from second to fifth grade and some sixth to seventh grade books for all levels of reading," Andrea said. She also chooses a



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Willeena Booker strikes a "kindness" super power pose.

She does this by discovering new ways to find, evaluate, and integrate inclusive books into her classroom library and her curriculum. One of the ways she accomplishes this is through on-going professional development via virtual workshops at the Teachers College at Columbia University. “They’re perfect for busy teachers’ schedules,” Booker said. “I do two or three of these a year—and I devour their lists of diverse books and the lessons that show how to bring them into my classroom to affirm different groups, voices, and stories. Then I make sure to order these books!”

In addition, Booker lists the benefits of being a member of the National Council of Teachers of English for her curriculum and classroom library. She’s an avid reader of its publications and regularly attends its meetings and conferences. “We share the same mission,” Booker said. “It’s to promote literacy in the classroom.” Her active participation in NCTE affirms what she believes about using diverse books, allows her to stay current on literacy and language learning, and helps her to thoughtfully choose books for her classroom library, read alouds, and instruction.

Booker also firmly believes that being active on social media is essential for curating her classroom library. “Believe it or not, social media—especially Twitter—is a very important tool,” Booker said. “I enjoy seeing educators’ posts and authors’ tweets about upcoming books. I make notes about what’s coming out and when.”

These online connections have led to relationships with authors—and finding books of theirs that elevate her teaching and her students’ learning to a whole new level. “With one book, *Luli and the Language of Tea*, that I learned about from its author, Andrea Wang, I was inspired to reach out to my local nature center and invite them to come talk to my class about plants associated with tea. I served the kids different teas with these plants—like mint,” Booker said, “and I was able to expand a plant lesson. The kids really liked it.”

Booker is committed to bringing more diverse authors into her school to increase the chance that students may also see themselves as authors. She also loves sharing her own writing and published poetry with her kids and her deep passion for reading.

“I’m so much more in love with reading now as an adult because of all I went through—and what I’m reading with my students,” Booker said. “Because of this, I’m even more motivated to have diverse books represented in my classroom library.”



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Nadya Abu-Rish shares a classroom library favorite.

**Nadya Abu-Rish** is a Palestinian American third grade Advanced Academic Program teacher at Beech Tree Elementary School in Falls Church, Va. Like Booker, as a child she didn’t feel connected to the books she read because she never saw herself in them. It wasn’t until she took a children’s literature class in college that she fell in love with books for children and wanted to be surrounded by them. Today, she works to share this love of books with her students.

One way she is spreading book love and literary connections is by carefully curating her classroom library. “Each year, I make sure I have a diverse selection of books—and I mean diverse in many different ways,” Abu-Rish said. “This includes books with characters of different cultures, ability levels, socio-economic statuses, and more.”

These titles also include many different characters and journeys, including kids living with allergies, dealing with economic struggles, and coming from blended families. It is important to Abu-Rish that all of her students see themselves in the books in their classroom library, their class books clubs, and daily read alouds.

A recent read aloud was *Marya Khan and the Incredible Henna Party* by Saadia Faruqi. “The character’s a third grader from Pakistan whose family doesn’t have as much money as her neighbors,” Abu-Rish said, “and she wants to have a lavish birthday party. Right now, we’re at a part where she’s trying to convince her parents, and they are not going for it.”

It's so relatable to all kids.”

Abu-Rish's passion for getting just the right books into the right hands extends outside her classroom doors to impact her students and others, too. As a teacher advisor for Scholastic Inc., she participates in virtual roundtables to offer her opinions on website content and marketing flyers to help the publisher “reach teachers where they are at.” She is also an active board member with R.E.A.D., a nonprofit for readers in need.

“R.E.A.D.'s vision is to empower families to foster empathy, curiosity, and confidence in young children through encouraging the joy of reading together every day,” Abu Rish said. “They want to get books into kids' hands from birth, and provide books to families and hospitals.”

Her work with R.E.A.D. also provides book donations for her classroom and alerts her to new diverse books to get for her library. It also affirms the importance of reading to her students every day—and giving them time to read and an ample supply of books from which to choose. “Kids are often too busy completing assignments to read anything for pleasure,” Abu-Rish said. “So it's important to give them time to read books of their own choosing, and to allow them to read whatever they want, as long as they are reading.”

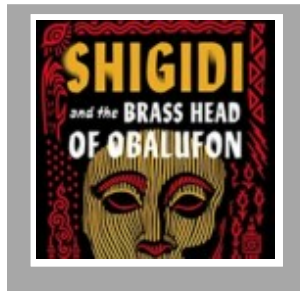
On top of her outreach, book research, and attendance at area book conferences and festivals to stay on top of children's books, Abu-Rish also reaches out to fellow teachers, librarians, and authors via social media for book recommendations to refine and increase her students' book choices.

“Choice allows my students to develop their palette of what kinds of books they want to read and what new genres of books they might explore,” Abu-Rish said. “And these books will allow them to make connections that otherwise they might not have made.”

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