

Literacy Equals Literature: A Novel Corner

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Wherever you turn these days, you're likely to hear the word "Literacy." It's everywhere, talked about as the key to student success and used as a buzzword in governments, funding, and administration. As teacher-librarians, we're used to being overlooked as key purveyors of literacy in the school setting, and we've already addressed in previous articles how we're working to change this situation. Now it's time to consider something else that's been overlooked in the literacy race: literature. This is the story of how one Board came up with a novel way of using it for Student Success....

The Background

As long as I've been a teacher, I've been a part of a determined group of people who have lobbied for new literature resources and novel kits within my board. The existing kits were dated, in disrepair, and not reflective of student interest. This was especially true in the intermediate area, where the reading level of most of the books suggested for intermediate students was far below grade level.

As an intermediate English teacher, I ranted and raved, but, with government cutbacks, funding was limited and my board, like others, simply didn't have money to spare. When I donned the teacher-librarian mantle, I continued to beg for new books, but it wasn't until 2002 that the first ray of light arrived.

A senior administrator in our board, Rod Peturson, who had heard me and my partners in crime rant for some time over the sad state of our literature resources, talked the Board into investing in our elementary libraries using existing funds. More than one million dollars was spent to refurbish 61 elementary school library collections, in what became known as the Elementary Library Resource Initiative. This was

great, celebrations ensued, and yet...our novel kits – the few books guaranteed to be read by students in an actual classroom setting – continued to languish. The funding just wasn't there, and without it, our hands (and purse-strings) were tied.

Fast track to the school year 2004-2005. The new Liberal government in Ontario announced the Student Success Initiative. The Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test was clearly the driving force behind the Initiative, and victory was within our grasp. Since intermediate students would have to increase their reading and writing abilities in grades 7 and 8, our Board wisely chose to use some of the Student Success funding to finally improve our literature resources. The Just Read Project was born!

The Just Read Project

Rather than simply purchasing new class sets of novels of a more recent vintage, a great deal of time and thought went into setting up the Just Read Project to reflect the best information we have about kids and reading...the essence of literacy, in my opinion. Before we officially began, our team sat down and crafted a vision of what the Project would look like when we were finished. This helped us define the goals by which we would determine our own success.

We knew we wanted multiple genres so teachers could best cater to student interest, as well as their own. We knew we needed books that reinforced topical themes and subjects of interest to adolescents, like prejudice and the World Wars. We definitely needed things that would appeal to reluctant readers, gifted readers, and even learning disabled students. We wanted to provide teachers with an easy way to select the best possible resources for their particular students in their particular class, and to give teachers a variety of ways to use the resources.

We committed ourselves to finding a way to