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# Student operated paperback bookshops: A program to encourage middle-grade literacy

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Children in the U.S. aged 12 to 15 have had daily reading instruction throughout their elementary years with considerable success in basic literacy achievement. Although these opportunities were sometimes too limited, they have had daily opportunities to engage in independent recreational reading at school. Further, parents may have offered regular or periodic reading experiences at home.

Some time after those primary school years, however, reading becomes less valued. There is less daily class time for independent reading, and students are read to less frequently. Time for instruction on reading new types of literature may dwindle as may praise for reading at school and home as expectations of new adult-like performances steadily

increase. Teachers may tell students that the time for learning to read is over and that they should now be prepared to read to learn.

Assessments repeatedly warn that something is missing. Findings from the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress in *The Reading Report Card* (1985) indicated that "nine and thirteen year olds did not show improvements between 1980 and 1984, halting the upward trend in performance at these ages during the 1970's" (p. 6). In a further explanation of the report, Applebee, Langer, and Mullis (1988) stated, regarding these middle-grade students, that

Poor readers report doing less independent reading than good readers. But, in comparison with good readers, they seem to be even more limited in their school reading experience than in the reading they do on their own. This suggests that poor readers could manage more varied school reading experiences than they are currently provided by schools. (p. 6)

Judith Davidson (1990), Project Director of Adolescent Literacy at the Center for Early Adolescent Studies, points out that "Early adolescence represents a critical juncture in the development of the literate individual" (p. 74). It seems obvious from current assessments that attention must be given to the literacy of middle-grade (5-9) students, particularly those with low economic support, but what and how?



*Bookshops entice students to own books. Misty Mercer, an eighth grader at South Side Middle School in Anderson, Indiana, shown here, reported the first book she ever purchased on her own was at the South Side Bookshop. (photo courtesy of Anderson, Indiana, Herald - Bulletin Newspaper)*

### School bookshops project

Concerns such as these stimulated an extensive 2-year grant project in Indiana called the Student Managed Paperback Bookshop Project. It is supported by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and directed by me at the School of Education at Indiana State University. The simplest overview of the plan is to imagine an ongoing book fair of discounted paperbacks, managed entirely by students as a regular school activity.

The original idea of the school bookshop was conceived in England in 1967 by education professor Peter Kennerly, who initiated an *adult*-managed program. Presently there are over 8,000 school bookshops operating in England, and they have formed a nonprofit national School Bookshop Association with an office in London (Hill & Triggs, 1981). A manual describing the English bookshop plan was produced in the United States in hopes of



*Students browse for books at the bookshop in Helfrich Park Middle School in Evansville, Indiana.*

extending the English successes, but the plan has yet to win wide acceptance (American Reading Council, 1977).

In 1989 I authored a grant proposal to Lilly Endowment, Inc., for funding of a *student*-managed bookshop for middle-grade, low-income students in Indiana. Our aim was to build upon the experiences of the English bookshops.

Our proposal was funded, and Indiana State University was granted nearly one-half million dollars to conduct the 2-year project. Sixty-one middle-grade schools located in the 53 lowest income communities of Indiana each received US\$5,000 for initial inventory and equipment, with the contingency that students would manage their experimental bookshop with adult administrative support. All 61 project bookshops were initiated and set up to operate independently and in a self-supporting manner after 1992.

### Board of directors

At each participating school, the principal appointed a volunteer adult to serve as the bookshop advisor (usually a teacher or school librarian). The principal and advisor selected two responsible and energetic students to guide the development of their own unique bookshop plans. An important goal was to establish a student board at each school to actually manage the bookshop.

It was the responsibility of student board members to select and order paperbacks at a handsome wholesale discount from efficient distributors. Student board members were also expected to develop or select needed equipment, establish the hours and work

schedules, and serve on various key committees. Further, it was the students' responsibility to market, promote, and sell their stock, keep proper records, and produce needed reports. Student leadership would be vital, as they were essentially responsible for managing the operation of what amounted to a small business.

Bookshop student leaders agreed that board members must be reliable workers and capable of working with others. As one student reported, "We did not get many good bookshop leaders from the school student council. They may be popular, but not all of them are good workers and interested in either literature or business." Some effective board members came from gifted classes and others from special education classes. What mattered was that they were dependable, energetic, and thoughtful. A student leader reported, "We can find a good job for any good worker."

Many bookshop boards developed a volunteer applicant screening procedure, often including teacher recommendations and personal interviews with bookshop officers. Several adult advisors concur that it has become a school honor to be on the bookshop board. Experience told us that it was important for each board member to have orientation and training on the specific tasks they were assigned. To promote continuity of operation, it was helpful when board members included students from the lowest grades in the building. Further, when a new fifth or sixth grader was given responsibility, she or he usually provided excellent performance. Many schools now include bookshop volunteer recruitment as part of their spring orientation for students who will enter that school the following fall.

The size of bookshop boards has usually been about 15 to 20, depending upon the demand of schedules and the bookshop tasks at each school. Likewise, committee sizes have varied, but the book selection and publicity committees have generally been the largest and hardest working.

### Equipment and supplies

It proved important to locate the bookshop in high traffic areas of the building. A few boards inherited spacious rooms or areas of the school library where shelving was already available, but many schools were very

#### Worker status and qualifications

"Many capable students not previously recognized for their skills or good thinking have gained recognition from their work at the bookshop," mentioned one principal. "We think we see some increased interest in scholastics," said another.

Student leaders soon discovered that dependability and willingness to work were essential qualifications for bookshop workers. There were a few reports of students "shaping up" those who slipped; a few workers were even "shipped out." All bookshop volunteers learned the importance of collaboration and cooperation.

pressed for space. As a result, portable bookshelves that folded and locked were used in many schools. Purchasing expensive permanent or portable shelving was not usually deemed feasible nor consistent with bookshop goals. One school obtained a donation of quality shelving from a local store that was closing business. Some boards solicited free lumber and hardware from local businesses. Most built or inherited shelves.

Aside from shelving, equipment and supplies were minor concerns for the boards. A shoe box could serve as a cash register, although one board purchased (at discount) a computerized cash register and felt it was worth the cost. Some boards used school computers to keep inventory and budget records, but more used spiral notebooks. Most supplies were obtained free or at nominal cost. Project schools made great efforts to reserve their grant money for purchasing books.

### Business hours

Scheduling bookshop hours depended upon two main factors that varied from school to school: available times for students to browse and available times for volunteers to work. Most bookshops began with a schedule of three 30-minute periods per week and added hours as demand grew. Lunch periods in excess of 30 minutes were popular times for bookshop operations.

One school had an extremely tight free-time schedule, but used library, English, and reading class times to allow every student at least a half hour at the bookshop each week. Another bookshop opened before or after school on alternating days; when faced with the need for more hours, this bookshop added times that were supervised by adult volunteers, since student leaders could not get free.

Scheduling volunteer workers became an important task of bookshop boards. Most found that individual schedule cards were needed. Most workers were scheduled for no more than two 30-minute periods per week.

### Marketing and advertising

Getting students, teachers, and parents aware of the bookshops was a challenge, so marketing became important. It was interesting to notice how students became aware of local business marketing techniques, which were often adapted for use at bookshops.

### Bookshops promote business skills

When asked why they liked being bookshop volunteers, most students noted the opportunity to learn and practice business skills and to make real decisions. Although profit was *not* the goal of any bookshop (constantly reinforced through workshop and newsletter guidance), students were motivated to make their businesses successful. The number of books sold represented the primary criterion of success, and net profits were merely an indication of a bookshop's longevity (about a 5% profit margin covered bookshop costs).

Most books sold at barely over actual cost, using an easily managed formula such as rounding to the nearest ten cents (no one wanted to deal with pennies). This covered wholesale costs for shipping and miscellaneous bookshop costs. When book prices were too high, sales often dwindled.

### Used books can extend literacy

Two bookshops experimented with used book trading. When one bookshop board suggested trading two used books for one used book, the adults were sure it would not work. Needless to say, it worked!

Another bookshop purchased used books, which were then sold at cost by the bookshop. Books in good condition were purchased for about 25% of the cover price. Students who sold books had money to buy other books, and the used books could be sold cheaply.

It is interesting to note that students were not prone to sell their books. They often reread them, gave them to friends, traded them, or loaned them. Books became a valuable commodity.

A successful marketing tactic has been bookshop gift certificates, usually sold in US\$1 denominations. Parent-teacher organizations have helped sell gift certificates; one school PTO sold US\$200 in gift certificates in 1 hour.

Many bookshops found that drawings for free books helped increase sales. Leaders of one bookshop gave teachers weekly US25¢ coupons for each class. The coupons were awarded to students by teachers at their discretion. Discounts were often given to teachers and volunteer workers to buy books at cost. Most bookshops regularly offered "blue light specials" and "regular customer bonus plans" (e.g., a free book every *n*th book purchased). One bookshop created "Scanning Specials," where extra discounts were given when customers bought specific books (e.g.,

### Customer surveys

Customer surveys indicated that peer influence motivated middle-grade students' interest in literacy. Students said they went to the bookshop because friends recommended and ran it. Surveys also indicated that large book selections, good prices, friendly service, creative promotions, and convenient locations made the bookshops popular.

on St. Patrick's Day, any book with the word *green* earned extra discount).

Advertising by publicity committees has typically included regular announcements on school public-address systems and ads in school newspapers. Grand openings have often attracted local newspaper, radio, or TV coverage. Hallway posters, display cases, and electronic billboards have displayed bookshop ads. As one publicity committee member said, "Our job is to ensure that everyone in the school hears, sees, or says the word *bookshop* at least once daily."

### Discounts, not give-aways

Project leaders are often asked to justify selling books to students from low-income homes. In response to that question, one bookshop student leader pointed out, "Our

kids have enough money for junk food or drugs, so it is just a matter of values." To build sincere and lasting value for literacy, there is some justification for the minor sacrifice to purchase a book.

Most bookshop books sold at about 35% off the cover price, with a mark-up just sufficient to sustain the program. Ordering committees tended to avoid very expensive books unless specifically requested. The average cost per book for one bookshop was US\$1.94; after markup, the books retailed at an average price of US\$2.05. A goal of the project was to make literacy so valuable and popular among middle-grade students that they would want to own books, and the lower cost of owning bookshop books proved within the financial reach of most project students.

### Student-selected titles

Project leaders are often asked which book titles are ordered by students, and whether they are different from titles ordered or recommended by adults. An informal comparison of adult and student book selections revealed that student choices differed considerably. Therefore, I recommend that students be allowed to do their own ordering of titles for bookshops.

What titles do students order? There is some consistency in ordering practices across bookshops, but we are hesitant to generate "favorite title" lists. First, there has been consid-

*Students at Portage Middle School in Fort Wayne, Indiana, enjoy working in their bookstore.*



erable variance among schools regarding what they order and when. For instance, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles books were not as hot in 1991 as they were in 1990. Books in Spanish were ordered by some bookshops in Gary and Hammond, Indiana, probably due to the Hispanic populations in these areas; in contrast, no books in Spanish were ordered in New Albany or Evansville, Indiana. During Black History Week, books on that topic went well in metropolitan Indianapolis but not in rural Charlestown, an occurrence explained also by demographic differences, I suspect. Horror books went well every place during October, however.

Popular categories were clearly those of adventure, romance, sports, science fiction, and humor. Some series books, such as Sweet Valley High, Hardy Boys, Baby Sitters, and Bank Street, appeared on nearly every report of student selections, as did joke books and how-to-draw books. In terms of describing students' ordering choices, I believe that categories are more reliable than specific titles.

Stephen King books have been surprisingly popular. They are often challenging reading—especially for remedial readers, who also order them—and they are more expensive than most paperbacks. They are also more controversial. One school required parental permission before buying a King book, and one advisor used a rare veto on ordering King books. The project requires students to respect school standards on all matters, but adult advisors have very rarely overruled an ordering committee; students have shown considerable maturity in their title choices.

### Bookshops spreading beyond the project

Several nongrant bookshops have emerged as a result of the success and publicity associated with the project. The independent bookshop leaders verified the prediction that about US\$500 could adequately establish an operational program. Raising the US\$500 seed money was not a difficult task. For example, after attending an Indiana International Reading Association state conference presentation by Project Bookshop students, Kathryn Myers, a Washington, Indiana, elementary reading teacher, promptly solicited US\$500 from her local Rotary Club to set up a bookshop at her school.

### Bookshops and commercial booksellers

At the beginning of the project, there was concern that local or national commercial paperback vendors might resent competition from the low-overhead school bookshops. When queried about this, however, every bookseller approached quickly pointed out that middle-grade students are seldom among their regular customers. Furthermore, commercial booksellers *encouraged* anything that could help develop this meager market. National paperback distributors often made special efforts to help the project grow, and local booksellers regularly offered special quantity discounts for bookshops.

From our experience, we recommend that bookshop buyers shop for a paperback book distributor who can:

1. Assure approximately a 40% discount on orders of 50 books or fewer.
2. Provide a free current catalog that contains a large and interesting book inventory.
3. Assure shipping and handling costs of no more than 2% of the order total and deliver books within 2 weeks of receiving an order.
4. Provide toll-free telephone service with cordial and accessible representatives.
5. Eliminate back-order billing or late shipping.
6. Provide occasional special offers.
7. Accept returns of damaged or unsold books with full credit.

Based upon these criteria, bookshop project leaders offer the following recommended distributors:

| <b>Distributor</b>   | <b>Comments</b>   |
|--|---|
| Ingram Library Services<br>1125 Heil Quaker Blvd.<br>LaVerne, TN 37086, USA<br>800-937-8000    | Requires 100+ titles for a 40% discount                             |
| Mr. Paperback<br>2914 Independence Dr.<br>Ft. Wayne, IN 46808, USA<br>800-525-7204             | Dependable but possesses a small inventory                          |
| NACSCORP<br>528 E. Lorain St.<br>Oberlin, OH 44074-1298,<br>USA<br>800-622-7498                | Requires US\$100 annual membership, but can meet all criteria       |
| Scholastic/Readers Choice<br>P.O. Box 7501<br>Jefferson City, MO 65102,<br>USA<br>800-325-6149 | Will refer to area representative who may not have toll-free number |
| The Bookmen<br>525 N. 3rd St.<br>Minneapolis, MN 55401, USA<br>800-328-8411                    | Particularly popular with bookshops for meeting most criteria       |

### Book clubs offer excellent discounts

Student leaders quickly learned that the commercial book clubs (e.g., Scholastic, Troll) they knew so well in their primary schools offered the very best prices but were limited in selections. Bookshops filled a void in schools that did not participate in book clubs, and several bookshops made cooperative agreements with teachers to manage existing book club business in the school. "Bonus books" earned from book club orders were added to the bookshop inventory or used as marketing items.

The key ingredient in starting a bookshop has clearly been leadership, not funding. It has usually taken just one enthusiastic teacher to establish a new, nongrant bookshop. Commitment of time and energy by the adult supervisors and the students involved, along with administrative support, are the essentials to a successful bookshop beginning.

One of the efforts to share the successes and procedures of the Student Managed Pa-

perback Bookshop Project is the production of a nonprofit *Bookshop Manual of Operations*. Based upon the experiences of the 61 project schools, this manual will be available in the fall of 1992 by writing: School Bookshops Project, SE 710, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, IN 47809, USA (phone 812-237-2836).

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