

Toward an Understanding of the Impact of Youth Involvement in Purchasing Resources for the School Library Learning Commons and Issues of Equity in Participant Selection

by Diana Maliszewski

Background Context

Participatory Learning is one of the five standards of the framework outlined in the document called *Leading Learning: Standards of Practice for School Library Learning Commons in Canada* (Canadian School Libraries, 2020). Participatory learning is “active and knowledgeable involvement” (Canadian School Libraries, 2020) in learning. Students are involved in many different aspects of my school library learning commons: as visitors who use the space, students who learn in the space and as library helpers who organize the space. Part of my Masters of Education degree in the Teacher-Librarianship via Distance Learning program with the University of Alberta from 2004-2010 involved writing a capping paper and mine included aspects of participatory learning. When I originally considered the topic for my capping paper I wanted to write about the impact of readers’ choice award programs. It was impossible to pursue this subject because there was no research on the topic. I completed my Masters capping paper (Maliszewski, 2011) with this unanswered question – “What is the impact of readers’ choice award programs on young readers?” – led me to an eight-year-long investigation that culminated in the publication of my research in a peer-reviewed academic journal. (Maliszewski and Soleas, 2018)

In my research paper, my co-author and I examined the factors that attracted students to participate in a particular readers’ choice awards program – the Ontario Library Association’s Forest of Reading © Program. We used a mixed method study, combining interviews and questionnaires, to determine what inspired students to become involved in the Forest of Reading. “Our findings highlight the role of library based programs in building intrinsic motivation through love of reading, the role of extrinsic motivation in building autonomous motivation, and the extent to which large readers’ choice programs promote student reading.” (Maliszewski and Soleas, 2018, p.46)

One conclusion related to the students who came to the “Festival of Trees”, now called the Forest of Reading Festival (Ontario Library Association, 2019). Many festival attendees self-identified as avid readers but “all types of readers can be brought to events to enjoy and benefit from the activities. Teachers might be selecting their best readers to come to the festival when they could instead bring the students that need

more support to foster lifelong reading habits. Students who do not find reading fun, had they been brought, could reasonably be motivated to read for many of the same incentives.” (Maliszewski and Soleas, 2018, p.55)

Personal Experience

The reason for this long preamble is its similarities to the topic of this inquiry paper: student involvement in library collection purchasing. For my entire library career, I have included students in the decision-making process of buying books for the school library. In 2001, shortly after amalgamation occurred and the Scarborough Board of Education became part of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), members of the Library and Learning Resources Department helped create a centralized shopping experience for their school library personnel with support from Saunders Book Company, (Saunders, 2019), the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) Resource Fair (Saunders, J., 2019, December 31). I have worked at my current school since 2004 and I bring students with me to purchase books every year at the GTA Resource Fair.



(Photos taken by Diana Maliszewski, November 12, 2019 at the GTA Resource Fair)

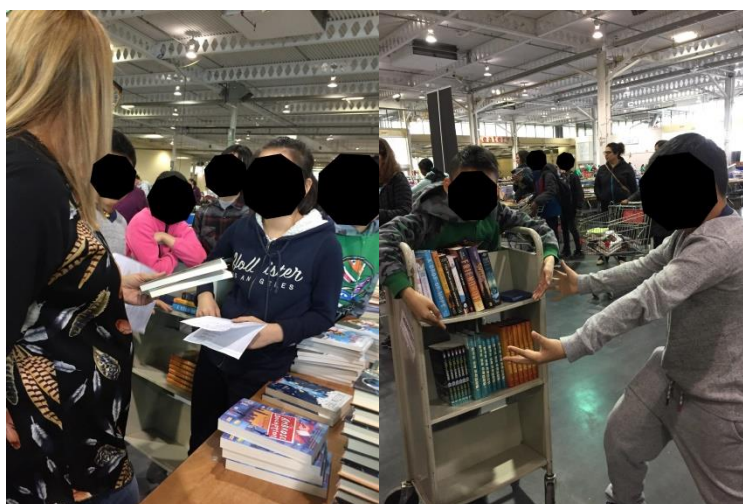
When I first included students at the GTA Fair, I overheard several negative comments and noticed many disapproving glances. The attitude at the time was that students did not belong in the space and that they were in the way of adults making important choices for their schools. Thankfully, this opinion has changed and now, in 2019, I witness many school library professionals bringing students to assist with book purchasing.

I have a particular process for guiding students through the experience (Maliszewski, 2011). This involves providing each student with a copy of the page called “Criteria for Assessing Learning Resources” from the *School Library Information Centre Handbook* (TDSB Library and Learning Resources Department, 2003). Together, the group of students and I review the selection criteria outlined on the page. I mention that although it is important to pick books that they themselves would like to read or borrow, they are selecting for the entire school and need to consider the opinions of students younger or older than they are. Often, certain buying priorities are mentioned and budget limits are shared. Once we arrive at the location, we use the “Skim-Scan-Consider” method of analyzing a text. I describe the GTA Resource Fair itself as a media text. Users must be aware of how the fair is constructed – i.e. that separate vendors are identifiable by the table cloths and signage at the rows of tables, so merchandise should not be taken out of the area unless paid for – and that the goal of each vendor is to get your business. We first “skim” the resource fair, to orient ourselves and become familiar with where vendors are located. We then establish a “home base” where we keep our coats and bags. Afterwards, in small groups, students declare where they will first start their more in-depth searching. When small groups feel like they have chosen all that they need or want from a particular vendor, one of the group members summons the teacher-librarian to finalize the purchase. Student shoppers have to be prepared to succinctly justify their selections to the teacher-librarian because she has veto power.

I also have a particular process for selecting students for the experience. This trip is one of the benefits of being part of the Library Helpers Club. Library helpers are student assistants that work in the library one recess a week to shelve books and keep the library tidy. Assistants apply for positions by completing an application form and a quiz on sorting materials alphabetically and numerically; not everyone is chosen.

Occasionally, other groups of students are taken for special reasons. In 2019, my then-principal, Bill Parish, approved a trip for me, a chairperson, and 22 students from the junior-intermediate division to the GTA Resource Fair. He also significantly supplemented class budgets (\$500 per class) for the purpose of diversifying the classroom library collections (Maliszewski, 2019). In 2009, my school received an Ontario Ministry of Education Boys Literacy grant to investigate graphic novels as a method for engaging and improving reading/writing skills. As part of that grant, we spent

\$3500 at the GTA Resource Fair with entire classes congregating there to pick the graphic novels they wanted (OISE Research Team, 2009).



(Photos taken by Diana Maliszewski, April 16, 2019, at the GTA Resource Fair)

Like my experience with student readers' choice awards programs, I had a "gut feeling" that taking students along with me to purchase books was a good thing, but I had no evidence that the practice was in any way beneficial. The original purpose of the present paper was to investigate the possible benefits of involving students in purchasing reading resources.

Initial Investigations

Once again, there were no actual research studies about this area of interest. The Toronto Public Library and the TDSB's Professional Library tried hard to help me locate supporting literature. This was frustrating for everyone involved:

“I have looked everywhere I can think of and can’t find anything like what you are asking for except the following blog post ... I didn’t see anything that discusses how book purchasing impacts students attitudes towards books or reading. So sorry.” (Ameline, J., personal communication, September 4, 2019)

(Photo taken September 7, 2019 by Diana Maliszewski)

As in my initial work with readers’ choice awards, I turned to student expertise to gain a foothold and starting point. On October 15, 2019, I interviewed four students and asked them what they considered to be the benefits of buying books for the school library. Their comments can be grouped into four categories.

- **Empowerment & Identity:** “Student voice – we are the people choosing books that peers prefer versus adults” (Celia S., personal communication, October 15, 2019) / “Important to get different perspectives from students, how they live and survive” (Jenny L., personal communication, October 15, 2019) / “If a teacher goes by him/herself, they get things they think we want to read [but] we have different interests; not all Grade 5s like Fortnite” (Seran K., personal communication, October 15, 2019)
- **Financial & Media Literacy:** “[Buying books] gives us more experience with buying stuff” (Jenny L., personal communication, October 15, 2019) / “The way they set up the store, they put the most attractive stuff to young people and it lures you in” (Kelly C.Q., personal communication, October 15, 2019) / “Marketing” (Jenny L., personal communication, October 15, 2019) / “...you think about the cost; is it worth it? Not just because it’s in the clearance section. It takes responsibility and maturity to buy” (Seran K., personal communication, October 15, 2019)
- **Social Immersion, Exposure & Discovery:** “Being in a culture or atmosphere of book lovers, we can get different brands ... meet new people and share interests” (Celia S., personal communication, October 15, 2019) / “[Buying books] inspires us to read more” (Jenny L., personal communication, October 15, 2019)/ “[We become] intrigued with genres we didn’t know about – I bought \$30 [worth of books] personally.” (Celia S., personal communication, October 15, 2019)

- **Enjoyment:** “The trip is a lot of excitement for people.” (Celia S., personal communication, October 15, 2019)



(Photo of student consultants, October 15, 2019, taken by Diana Maliszewski)

I also asked this panel of experts about the type of people that typically were given the opportunity to buy books for the school library. They said that library helpers are usually:

- People who already like books
- Responsible
- Girls
- People who like to do clubs

Literature Review - Financial Literacy

Chris Allum wrote an article for *School Libraries in Canada* journal on financial literacy entitled “Building financial literacy: Helping students learn money skills for life” (Allum, 2013). Allum considered the role of school library professionals in supporting the growth of financial literacy to be more aligned to resource recommendations, rather than directly purchasing items. Allum suggested that “While personal finance is taught in classrooms throughout the country – and the topic is on the school curriculum in a handful of provinces – there is no national standard for financial education. Teachers who don’t have the structure of a personal finance curriculum– and even those who do – need teaching tools to help them meet appropriate learning outcomes. While students may be interested in the topic, they need more access to resources that will help them learn. School librarians can play a key role in helping both teachers and students find the resources they need.” (Allum, 2013, p.29)

An article written by Carly Sawatzki and Peter Sullivan, called “Shopping for Shoes: Teaching Students to Apply and Interpret Mathematics in the Real World”, (Sawatzki & Sullivan, 2018), appeared in the *International Journal of Science and Mathematics* and has relevance to general purchasing. Sawatzki and Sullivan used financial literacy lessons that employed real-world scenarios. They reported success and said that “Students seemed to connect with the task because it was based on a real world situation they had observed, experienced or could imagine. The accessible nature of the problem context helped students to experience that mathematics is useful to everyday financial problem-solving. Specifically, students were exposed to practical or realistic applications of mathematical operations and fractions in financial contexts and the possibility of multiple plausible solutions, each supported by reasonable social and mathematical interpretations and arguments. (Sawatzki and Sullivan 2018, p.1370) This was promising research but there was no attempt at real-world application, by actually buying (in the case of the simulation) shoes.

Literature Review – Reader Identity, Community, and Agency

So much of the related research mirrored my earlier searches into readers’ choice award program benefits. For instance, a key study that informed my work on readers’ choice awards was Valerie Bang-Jensen’s small sample interview study on the impact of Vermont’s Dorothy Canfield Fisher Book Award. (Bang-Jensen, 2010) Bang-Jensen concludes her research on readers’ choice awards with the following recommendations: “It is clear that finding a good match for a reader’s needs must be on the mind of every teacher and librarian, as is the development of strategies for readers to select their own books. To find ways to include the reader’s choices in this process is paramount in developing engaged readers. State and library children’s choice nominees offer possibilities created with different, and often richer, criteria than allowed by the narrower focus on readability levels and text characteristics. When readers have their say in selecting books, they exercise agency in the development of their own reader identities and create a rich relationship with books.” (Bang-Jensen 2010, p.175) What I would suggest is that selecting books can involve more than just signing them out of a library, but actually by getting the books into the library in the first place.

The social aspect of reading and the development of reading communities can be equally important. Mary Jo Fresch worked with much younger children than the ones that go book shopping with me, but insights can still be gained. In her article, “Self-Selection of Early Literacy Learners”, (Fresch,1995), Fresch notes, “Many such incidents were observed, where together various strategies were discussed and used to read text. In such situations, children are learners and teachers. And, once again, the self-selection time provided evidence to the teacher that they were using developing knowledge about reading to solve problems without her help. My observations suggest

that there is benefit to buddy reading. The social interaction during reading can be instructive to either child.” (Fresch, 1995, p.224)

The blog post by Pernille Ripp is a good source of primary data, as she quotes her students’ reasons for hating book clubs and how she changed their feelings. She writes, “I learned how they want to be independent readers and thinkers, how they want to be able to have choice in everything so that they can invest themselves fully.” She describes the next stage of her process with her students this way: “The day after the conversation, I had them book shop. Every group went from choice to choice and debated the merits of the books laid out before them. Every group weighed their options, and only one group out of about 30 needed my guidance in book choice” (Ripp, 2015). The unfortunate part was that Ripp had already made the purchasing decisions prior to this moment, which from her account at the beginning of the blog was a learning-rich and engaging task for her: “I had meticulously made my lists. I had thoughts of habits, tastes, personalities, reading preferences, pace and yes, even their assessment data. I had scoured the book room, gone book shopping spending my own money and used most of my Scholastic points.” (Ripp, 2015) If student choice had been allowed even at the purchasing stage, there could have been even more opportunities for deeper learning.

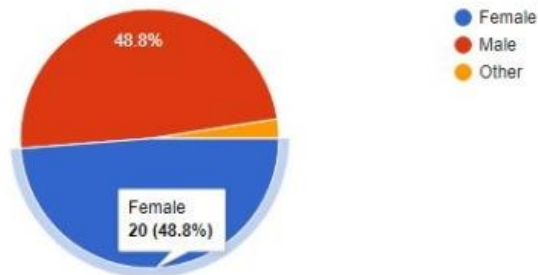
Research Methodology

My research question was “What are the benefits of involving students in purchasing books for the school library?” With input from David Cameron, Senior Manager of Research and Development for TDSB, I designed a survey for all the students from Grades 4-8 to take. For several reasons - the busy time of year, the fact that it wasn’t mandatory to take the survey, and the ETFO work-to-rule restrictions about professional learning community work, I was only able to get 41 responses out of a potential 120 recipients. Despite the small sample size, the information was useful.

Data Analysis and Discussion

What gender are you?

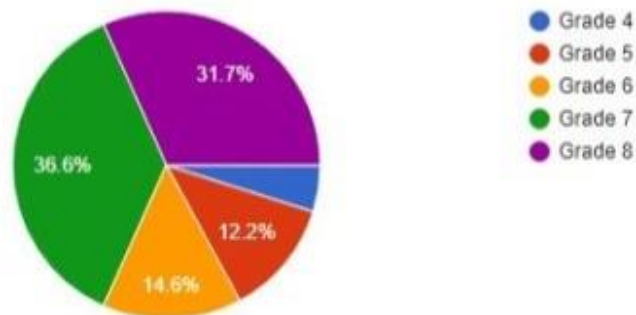
41 responses



Twenty of my respondents were male, twenty were female and one identified as other. It's an even gender representation and also interesting to get non-binary representation as well.

What grade are you in?

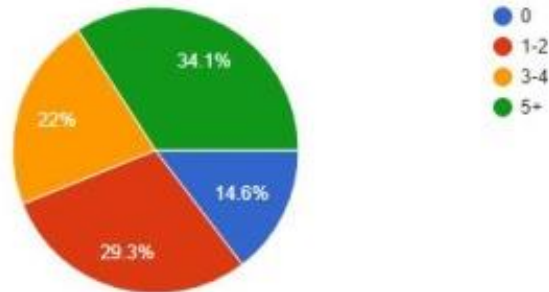
41 responses



Most of my respondents were intermediate division students – Grades 7 and 8. This means that they might have studied for several years at my school, although some could have transferred to my school from other locations. This also suggests that the average age of the respondents leans towards being the oldest students in an elementary school.

How many clubs/teams are you usually involved with at school per year?

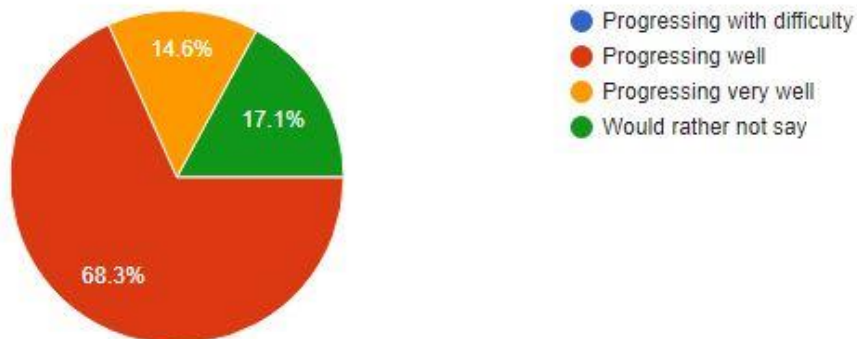
41 responses



The students at my school love to join clubs and teams. My hypothesis was that library helpers join a lot of other clubs but the truth was that most students in general at my school (85%) are participants in extra-curricular activities.

What mark did you get for Language on your most recent progress report card?

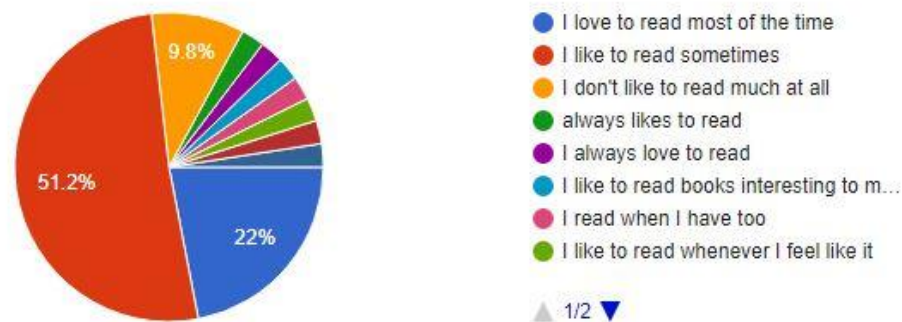
41 responses



I also theorized, based on data from my readers' choice awards program research, that good readers are often the ones rewarded with literacy trips. This question was meant to see if there was a correlation. Either no one was comfortable sharing that they might have poor Language report card marks, or no one that bothered to answer the survey had poor Language report card marks.

What sentence best describes you as a reader?

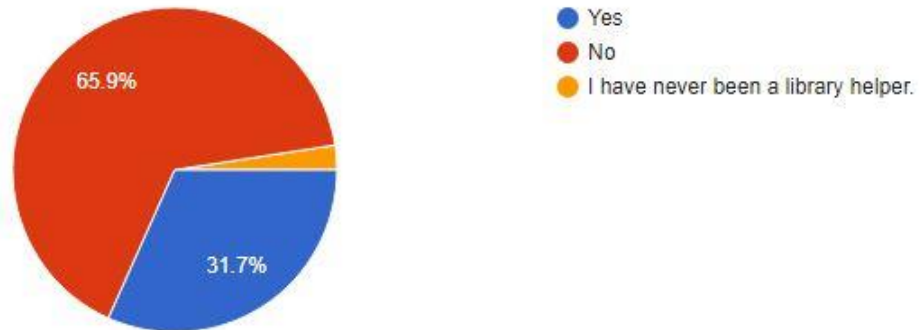
41 responses



There were three options provided. Half of all respondents (21 individuals) said they like to read sometimes; 22% (9 individuals) said they love to read most of the time and 9.8% (4 individuals) said they don't like to read much at all. The "other" category got used much more frequently than I anticipated. Seven respondents clarified their feelings and frequency of reading with statements like "depends on the mood", "I always love to read", "always likes to read", "I like to read books interesting to me i.e. Harry Potter", "I read when I have too [sic]", "I love to read all the time" and "I like to read whenever I feel like it". This suggests that feelings towards reading and frequency of reading are two separate ideas with many different gradations (e.g. love vs like).

Are you now or have you ever been a Library Helper?

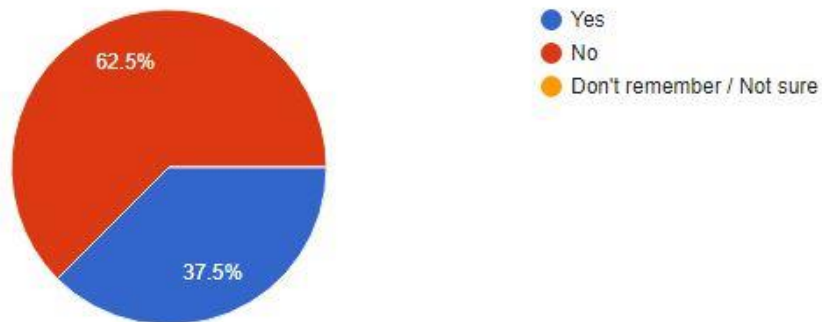
41 responses



Nearly 2/3 of the respondents (27 individuals) have never been a library helper – which means they are less likely to be chosen to go on a book buying trip if my current system of selecting students for book purchasing excursions is to be maintained.

Have you ever been on a school trip to buy books?

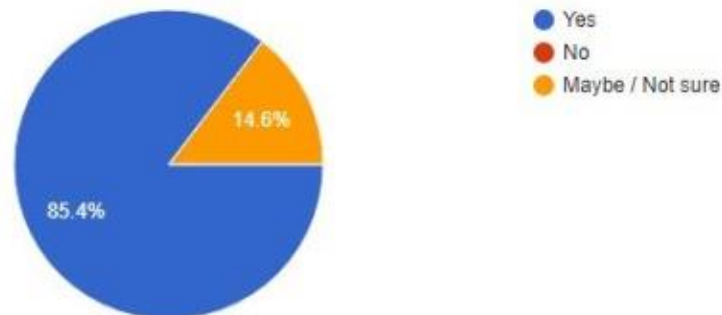
40 responses



This graph mirrors the previous one, which supports the fact that it may be only library helpers that regularly get the opportunity to shop, 25 vs 15 individuals.

Would you like to be chosen to go on a school trip to buy books?

41 responses



This graph made it clear that most students would happily go on a book buying trip. Thirty-five out of 41 students surveyed would like the opportunity to go to purchase books with school money for school use. The respondents that were uncertain did not get a chance to explain why they would hesitate at the chance to go book shopping. This is a survey design flaw.

The list of reasons why students thought that it would be good to be involved with book buying had three distinctive themes to the responses. (For a complete list of all responses, see Appendix A.) The themes were student interest, new books, and learning. The most common response related to student interest and agency was 30 of the 41 responses mentioned student interest. A typical answer was “the students would know what types of books their age group would [sic] like to read”. It was fascinating to read how students sometimes doubted the ability of the teachers to understand their preferences or needs. “If [the] teacher buy the books, some students would not like the type of book, the style of the book, or the difficulty of the book”. The second category of response related to new books and genres, with eight answers. One such response was “It lets them experience different books that they never known about [sic]”. The final category of response dealt with the academic advantages or things that students could learn from the experience. Seven answers mentioned some school-related benefit such as “to let students improve their reading”.

The last two questions of the survey asked participants to name as many authors and as many genres as they could. The purpose for those questions was to indicate that library helpers were more likely to know and name more authors and types of books.

Time constraints meant that there was not enough time to examine the results, count and compare the answers.

Final Thoughts

As is apparent from the foregoing, much work remains to be done on this topic. There is still insufficient data to be able to draw any firm conclusions regarding the impact of involving students in purchasing resources for their school library learning commons. I hope in the future to gather additional data using much more stringent, focused research methods with clear goals to ascertain any possible benefits. To this end I intend to extend the opportunity for book shopping beyond library helpers.

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Appendix A: Reasons from the Survey on Why Students Should Buy Books

It lets them experience different books that they never known about

It is a good idea to let students buy books because students chose like students. So other people might like the books to because it is chosen by the student.

It might be a good idea to let students buy books because it might show what people like books and what their reading level is and what they're mostly interested in.

It might be a good idea to let some students pick books so we can find new things.

They can pick books they like and that others like too.

Because it allows them to learn

To let students improve their reading

So they can see what books they like

Because we might know what other students like and prefer, we would know what our classmates would like or prefer to read in school or free time.

So, they can learn new words and new books to read.

It's a good idea to let students to buy books, because the students can chose what book they like the most.

The students would know what types of books their age group would like to read

It gives us student voice and we can buy for our grade.

Student should buy some books (not inappropriate) so there're more variety of books for other to read.

Because some people like books that aren't in the school library like some manga's

Because they have a taste in books

By letting students to buy books, you are giving them chances to express themselves through books

It is important to listen to the student voice and opinions.

It's a good idea because children of different grades have different preferences. Not all teachers know what students like or dislike.

If teacher buy the books, some students would not like the type of book, the style of the book, or the difficulty of the book.

I very responsible

It would be a good idea because then students get to pick books that kids their age would like to read.

I think it is a good idea because they will know what kind of books that we read

So they can choose what they want to read.

Students know what other kids their age would like to read so it saves the school money and time.

The books that the students chose might suit the taste of other students.

Students have a better taste of what kids like to read.

The students have different type of genres on books

So they can buy books they want to read or books they think people would like to read.

Because they can pick what they like and other student the same grade might be interested. And they have the ability to choose what they want for either themselves or others.

It can increase other students to read more because when students buy books, students can be influenced.

It might be a good idea because students would get to choose what books they feel like would suit their classmates.

To let them read more.

It gives students the opportunity of empowerment and student voice. It provides a chance for those to develop learning skills to benefit a better learning environment. For example: better mindset and hyped to go to school. We can also provide the skills of responsibility and leaderships (through buying books and repeating the school's behalf). It gives them a sense of duty. We can also be amongst the culture of love of book readers. We can learn new genres and books etc. It is a great opportunity for all students. We have the choice and can help make decisions for all age groups in our school.

There are more selection of books that might get chosen because of the variety of interests the student have

I think it is a good idea because student can get a or some book they what if the library does not have it.

Because some people don't have books that they like in the school library.

So they can read more

So they know what books other students might like because it might be popular and the same level of reading