

# Creating a Student-Accessible Classroom Library

By Michele Krank | Categories: Diverse Literature

One thing you should know about me is that I can never resist a good children's book! On vacations, I always look for a new title; I'm a total sucker for a bookstore (either new or used); and my Amazon wish list is out-of-control! At the beginning of my teaching career, I was more than a little overwhelmed with how to share all of these great books with my students. I spent days and days finding thematic stickers to place on the books, sorting them, and then stuffing bookshelves full of all of the choices. As you can imagine, within minutes of my students stepping into my room, my meticulous system was in disarray. *How did my insect books get mixed in with my number books? What was that family book doing in the ABC bin?* I was beyond a comfortable level of frustration. I assumed that I had not been fastidious enough in creating the system; I reorganized, downloaded some cute book bin labels, and then re-shelved the bins, but again to no avail. No matter what I did, the books always seemed to be in chaos.

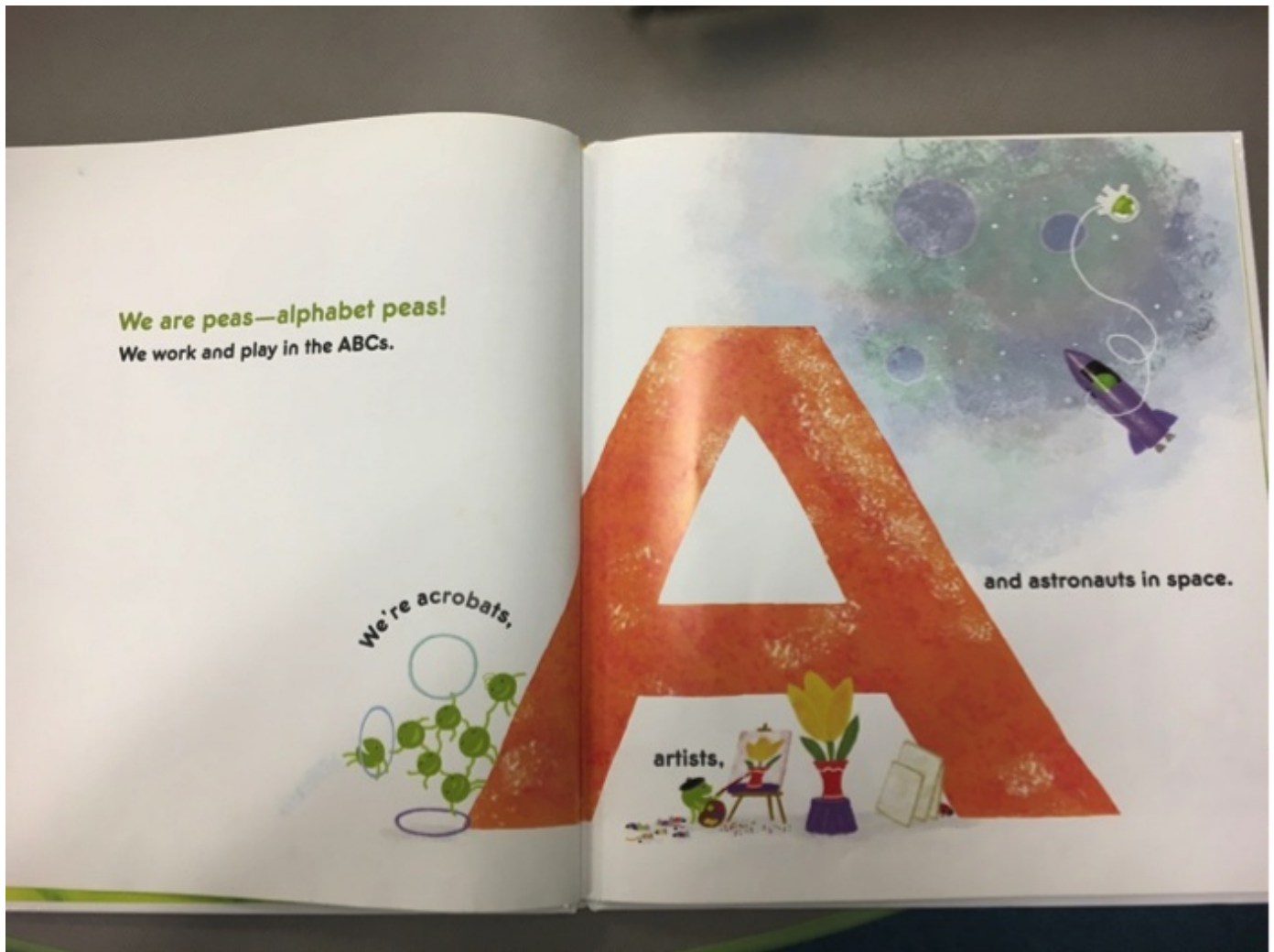
After years of facing this struggle, I finally realized that my system was inherently flawed. I had created something that worked for **me**, but that didn't work for **my students**. I had created a library where I easily knew where to find everything, but my students had no investment in it. There was no way they could be successful with a system they didn't understand and didn't help create. After years of chaos, I eventually overhauled everything and now have a system that works! If you want to make your students have more ownership of their classroom library, here are some of the things that helped me:

## Careful Selections

While I probably own thousands of children's books, I display only a very limited number of them at any given time. For example, at the beginning of the year, I put only a handful of bins on my classroom library shelves. I make sure that the topics I select are completely clear at first glance, and that they are high-interest. This year, I began with the following 7 bins:

- ABC Books
- Books about School
- Pete the Cat Books
- Number Books
- Books about Dogs
- Sports Books
- Books about Tigers (our class mascot this year)

Even within each bin, I was careful with the books I included. For example, I looked through all of my available ABC books, and selected only titles in which each letter was large and obvious. If the letter forms were more subtly presented, I decided to exclude them early in the year.



*This was a perfect selection for our alphabet bin at the beginning of the year. Each letter is large and obvious as students open the book.*



*While this is a great alphabet book, the letters aren't as obvious to emergent readers, so it was not included in my ABC bin at the beginning of the school year.*

As I chose books for each bin, I tried my best to think like a 5-year-old and asked myself a crucial question: *Can I tell which bin this book belongs in from just the cover or the first page?* If the book didn't pass that test, I didn't select it. This was hard for me. I had some favorites that didn't make the cut. However, I reconciled myself to my criteria by accepting that I could read a book aloud even if I had not put it in the classroom library at that time.

When I first undertook this project a few school years ago, I worried about our classroom library looking a bit bare at first. However, I reasoned that just like the bare walls at the beginning of the year, it would soon grow into something more. I also know that kids cannot learn a complicated system all at once. They need time at the beginning of the school year to figure out how a classroom library works, then additional bins can be added or traded as the year progresses.

For example, we will soon be doing a science unit on butterflies. By that time, I anticipate the children being done reading school books and being ready for a new and exciting bin. I also find that the novelty of switching books and bins throughout the year keeps the students excited about reading! I make decisions about bins as I go, if the students are still engaged with the school books, I will simply add the butterfly books as an eighth bin. Overall, I try to have fewer than ten bins out at any time in order to ensure that students will be able to remember the topic in each bin.

## Creating Ownership

A second important change is that I now have my students help me label the books. I want the library to be *our* library, not just mine. During the first week, I allow the students to explore the “books about school,” but I don’t yet give them access to other types of books. I tell the students that they will be able to read other books, but that we will have to learn about each bin before they can take books from that bin.

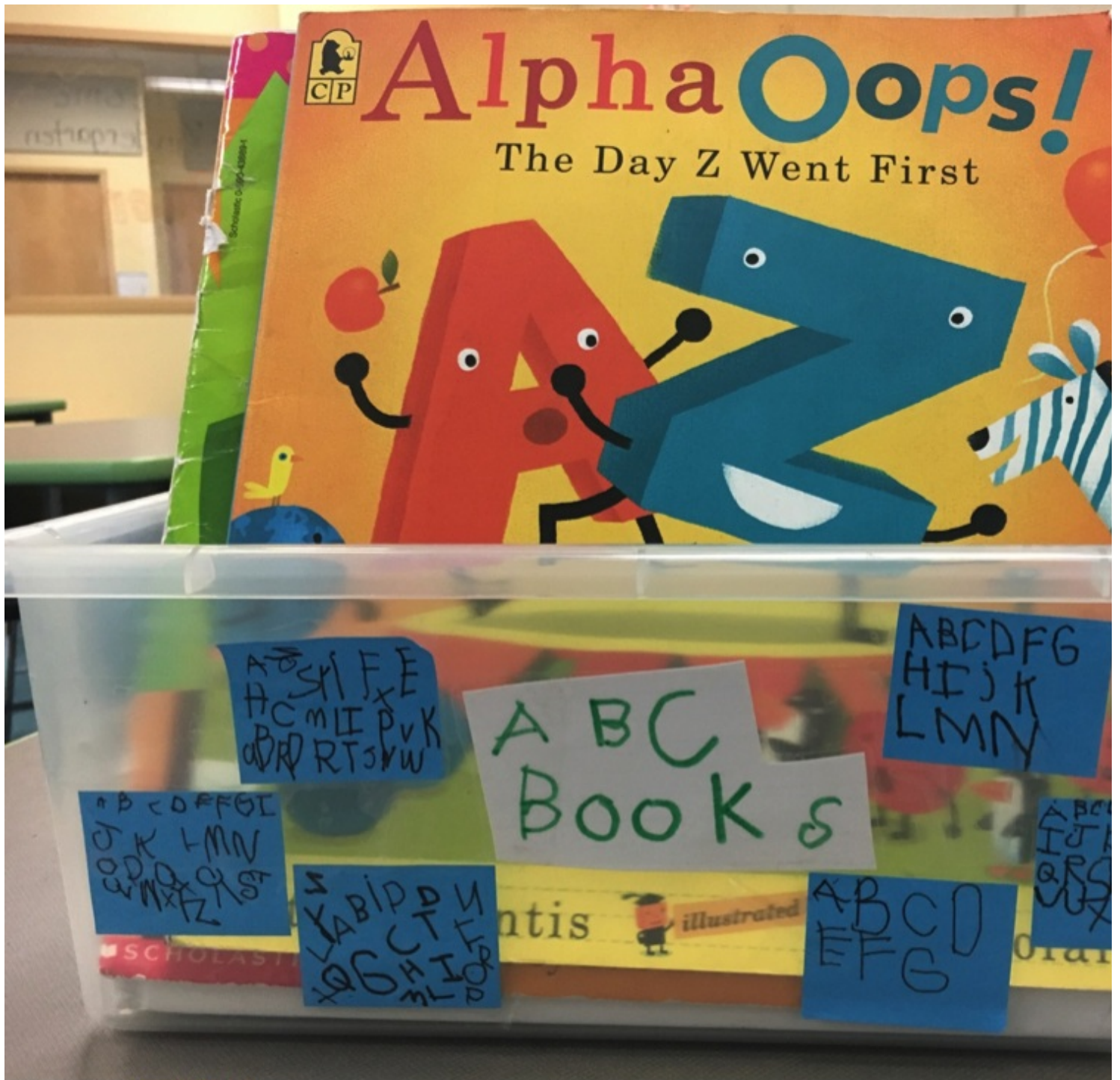
I begin this work with the ABC bin. We all gather in a circle on the carpet. I tell the students that I have a very special bin of books, but I need them to help me come up with a name for the bin. We pass the bin around the circle, and each child takes a book. I give them a few moments to browse the books, then I ask for their attention. I ask, “*What do you notice about these books? What do you see on the pages?*” Inevitably, one or more students notices the letters. I say, “Hmm, that’s interesting. Some of you noticed the alphabet! Everyone look in your book and see if your book has the alphabet letters too?”

Once we have decided that this is indeed a bin of ABC books, we write a label together and tape it to the front of the bin. I use interactive writing strategies when making the label for the bin. I have students take turns coming up to write the letters or sounds they know, then I fill in the “tricky” parts. For the ABC bin, three different students came up to write the letters A, B, and C. Then, we sounded out the word *books*. One student heard the /b/ at the beginning, and one students heard the /s/ at the end. They wrote those letters, and I wrote *o-o-k* in the middle.

Once the label is made, each student makes an illustration or sign to decorate the bin. I start by modeling the process, then I hand each child a small self-stick note for their own work. They go to their tables and make their own representations of what is in that particular bin of books. For the ABC bin, I prompted the students to write different letters all over their self-stick notes. Once everyone has finished, I tape the notes all over the bin, so the students can clearly see what type of book belongs.

Here’s our completed ABC bin for this school year:





## Practice, Practice, and More Practice

After we have spent time labeling multiple bins of books, I have the children practice putting the books away over and over again. I gather lots of titles and we talk about how to figure out where book goes on the library shelf. I have children talk through their choices. We practice, practice, and practice some more.

Throughout the year, I revisit these lessons as I notice that students are starting to be careless with their sorting. One thing we know as teachers is that there is never too much practice!

## Additional Suggestions

Here are a few more strategies I use during the year to keep things going smoothly in our classroom library.

**Class Librarian** – One of my class jobs is “class librarian.” This student checks through the bins to make sure books are in the correct place. The job reinforces the importance of taking care of our books.

**Lost Books** – There is another bin on the shelf labeled “lost books.” I let students know that they can place a book there if they really cannot figure out where to put it in the library. The class librarian can try to figure out where these books belong, or I just check the bin at the end of the day and reshelve the stragglers.

**Book Hospital** – We spend a lot of time talking about how to handle books carefully, but accidents do happen. If a page tears or falls out, the students place the book in the “Book Hospital” bin. Every so often, I work on getting these books back into shape. This is also a great task to hand a parent volunteer!



Once we've worked on lots of bins, our library begins to look much more exciting! Here is a snapshot of the way our bookshelf looks after 12 days of kindergarten:



