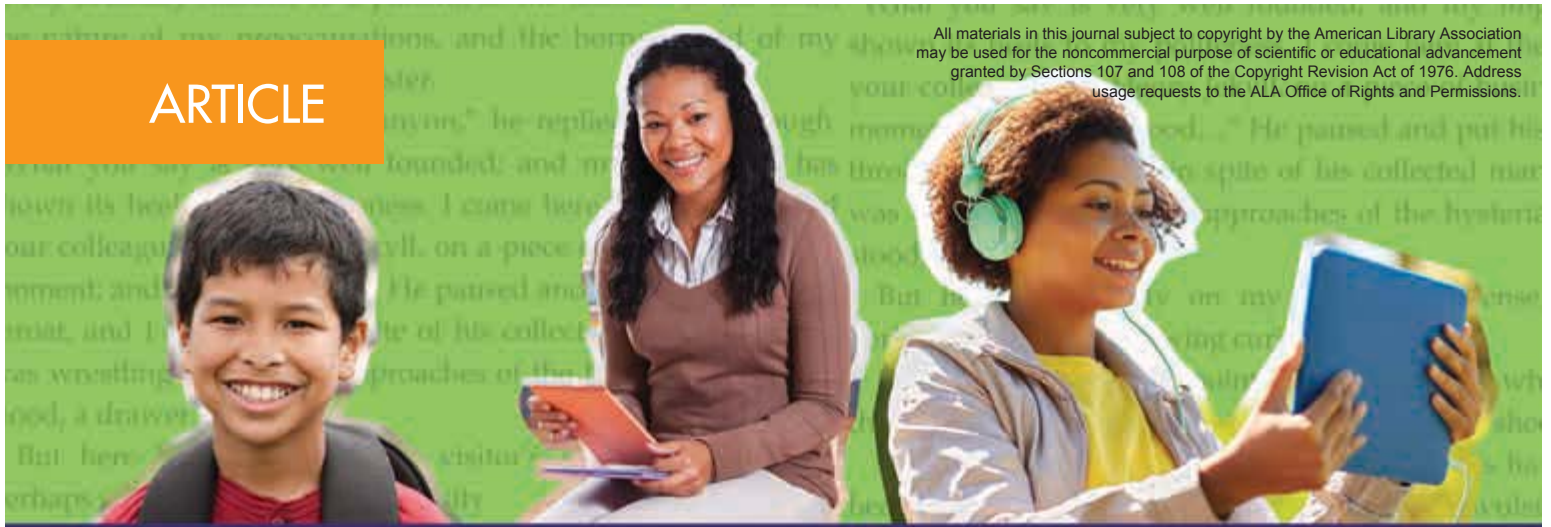
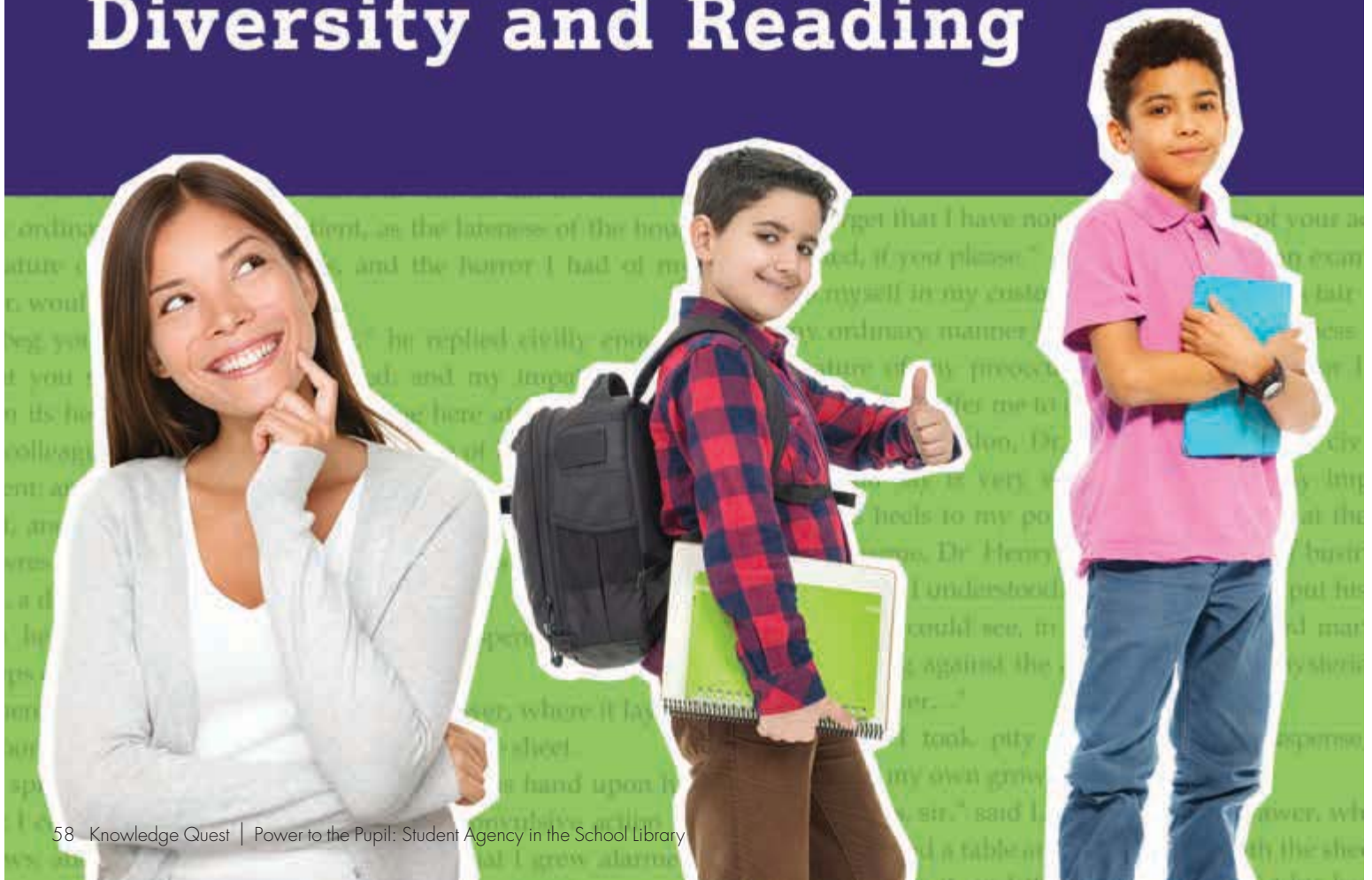


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Public School Librarians and Academic Librarians Join Together to Promote Diversity and Reading



Grace M. Jackson-Brown

Gjackson-brown@MissouriState.edu

In this article I share my story of involvement in a national literacy initiative known as the African American Read-In (AARI) in a major city of the “Show-Me State,” Springfield, Missouri, population 164,122 (according to a 2013 census). The article highlights successes that public school librarians and university librarians are experiencing as we work together to promote diversity and reading through a community-wide effort. Our collaborative efforts may inspire other educators to learn more about the AARI and to become involved.

About AARI

The AARI was founded in 1990 by Dr. Jerrie Cobb Scott, a long-time active member of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the Black Caucus of the NCTE. Dr. Scott is

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now a retired professor of urban literacy and former director of the Reading Center at the University of Memphis. It was her vision to make the promotion of reading books written by African American authors an integral part of Black History Month. For the last twenty-seven years the AARI has been a national event during the month of February to correspond with Black History Month. AARI is sponsored nationally by the NCTE <www.ncte.org/aari> and is hosted by the Black Caucus of the NCTE.

The AARI records the number of sites and level of individual participation through “report cards” that are sent to the national headquarters. Records show that individual participants “in recent years [topped] 200,000” (Aronson 2014, 17). Reports have come from forty-seven U.S. states and internationally from the West Indies, Ghana, Germany, and Australia. An investigation of the number of individuals participating in the AARI in the state of Missouri for the period from 2009 to 2011 found that nearly 30,000 individuals took part in AARI programs, and the majority were from public school sites (Jackson-Brown 2011).

For the last nearly ten years I have served as chairperson of a

community-wide AARI in Springfield, Missouri, while serving as an academic librarian at Missouri State University. I’ve partnered with K–12 librarians and other academic librarians, in both public schools and universities, working together for two common goals: to promote African American authors/literature and to help build a community of readers. In fact, the Springfield AARI is a collaborative partnership of five organizations:

- Missouri State University Libraries
- Springfield Public Schools
- Springfield–Greene County Public Library District
- Drury University
- NAACP Springfield Chapter

The state-legislated mission of Missouri State University (MSU) is to educate students to be “global citizen scholars committed to public affairs” (MSU 2016). A comprehensive undergraduate university, MSU also provides some graduate programs. Its focus on public affairs is exemplified by education using three pillar conceptual themes: community engagement, cultural competence, and ethical leadership. My involvement in the

AARI community literacy project as an associate professor of library science at MSU is a part of my engaged public scholarship, which aligns with my role as an information literacy educator. The benefits of K–16 collaborations have been outlined by Ellysa Stern Cahoy and Lesley Moyo in a chapter of a book about academic library outreach that specifically focuses on K–16, and they stated:

K–16 (K–12 and undergraduate education) collaboration is an educational initiative that has grown as a result of renewed higher education outreach efforts of the last ten to fifteen years. It is a collaborative effort among K–16 educators and the community to ensure that students have the academic preparation and support that they need to succeed in college. Collaborating to better understand and develop students' information literacy skills is integral to impacting student academic success. Academic libraries are actively participating in this outreach model, increasingly reaching out and partnering with school and public librarians to improve and support students' information literacy skills across the K–16 spectrum. (2009, 21)

Examples of Collaborations

Here are several project scenarios that involved university collaboration with school librarians and public schools. All of the projects to be highlighted incorporate the NCTE teaching philosophy to build teaching/learning environments that encourage students to “Read/Write/Think.”

Two major authors Patricia C. McKissack and Shane W. Evans have participated in Springfield AARI

programs through a relationship that the AARI organizers developed with organizers of a parallel event, the Children's Literature Festival of the Ozarks. The pairing is natural; most of the festival organizers are retired and active school librarians. The festival is an annual day-long event where children interact with authors who read from their books. The day after the festival in 2009 Patricia C. McKissack and in 2011 Shane W. Evans gave workshops for the AARI youth audiences. These workshops were held in venues separate from the Children's Literature Festival of the Ozarks and were free and open to interested groups of the general public. The expenses of travel, hotel accommodations, and speaking fees were shared by the two sponsoring groups, reducing the burden on AARI, which has a modest budget.

AARI covered expenses related to the author workshops. In addition, the workshops presented by author and illustrator Shane W. Evans received a funding grant from the Missouri Humanities Council (MHC) in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities. The MHC grant was awarded to the NAACP Springfield Chapter and several institutional partners of the AARI, including the MSU Libraries, to support two workshops with the theme “Dream BIG.” In the workshops, Shane Evans presented information about his book *Underground: Finding the Light to Freedom* (Roaring Brook 2011) that had received a Coretta Scott King Book Award in 2012. His inspirational and interactive presentation inspired children and young people to follow their dreams. He also shared stories about his extensive travels and visits with people in countries in West Africa and in Japan.

The AARI workshop that featured multi-award-winning author Patricia C. McKissack was a teaching workshop titled “Finding Your Own Voice” developed for middle school and high school students. This half-day workshop brought participants to an MSU lecture auditorium where they received instruction on writing short stories from this master teacher and author. Students were given the opportunity to write their own short stories during the workshop with the option of receiving feedback. Discussions centered on how a writer finds his or her own voice in writing fiction or nonfiction, and on techniques writers use to develop and project their own unique voices.

In another example of collaboration, in 2014 the Springfield AARI arranged a virtual visit between a selected group of students from one local high school and U.S. Congressman John Lewis, who is coauthor of the graphic novel *March* trilogy that, in part, covers his experiences as a young person in the Civil Rights Movement.



The AARI provided free copies of *March: Book One* to the participating high school students. A formal book discussion during a study hall was conducted with the students. In culmination, a small panel was selected from among the students; panel members developed questions to ask Congressman Lewis during a Skype forum. In a follow-up discussion, students expressed appreciation for the opportunity to speak with and learn from someone who was deeply involved in a student movement that helped to usher in major civil rights changes that resonate with the current generation of high school students. Research in the scholarly literature has found that African American students often have a special reader appreciation and gain greater self-esteem by reading about characters who “look like them” or with whom they can identify culturally (Mestre 2009; Blas 2014).

A final collaboration example involves the planning process for the events of the February 2017 Springfield AARI. Planning for the annual AARI event starts the previous August—or even earlier. The steering committee is made up of a representative from each of the five partnering organizations. For 2017 the committee decided to adopt their upcoming theme based

on an inscription from promotional materials provided on the NCTE/AARI website.

The inscription on the postcard template in the Read-In Toolkit states, “It is important for all of us to see ourselves in books” (NCTE 2016).

As I write this in October 2016, the Springfield AARI steering committee for the 2017 event has plans to work with one of the local middle

schools with a newly remodeled school library containing a makerspace area where students can create posters or other media using the event theme. Among the ideas generated have been student-created posters featuring African American characters from novels that the students admire. Real African American persons who represent heroism or other admirable traits and are featured in nonfiction works may also be used in publicity for the 2017 AARI event. The middle school students involved will be asked to write poems or brief book talks to accompany their posters and other works selected for presentation during an AARI program.

As an academic librarian, associate professor, and chairperson of the AARI in Springfield, I developed relationships with local area school librarians at all levels (elementary, middle, and high school); these relationships have helped to lay a



Grace Jackson-Brown, PhD, is an associate professor with the Missouri State University (MSU)

Libraries, Research and Instructional Services Unit. She is chair of the Springfield African American Read-In, a community-wide literacy project made up of five organizations, among them Missouri State University Libraries and Springfield Public Schools. She teaches for-credit information literacy courses for MSU. She has taught library science courses as part of a cooperative agreement between MSU and University of Missouri-Columbia, including Reference and Information Resources. Between 2013 and 2015 she served on the AASL/ACRL Interdivisional Committee on Information Literacy.

foundation for working together. Since 2008 the Springfield African American Read-In programs have also established embryonic relationships between other librarians in the area, relationships that could be further developed into strategic Pre-K–16 literacy partnerships. If your school district doesn't already participate in AARI events, I strongly recommend reaching out to school, public, and academic librarians in your geographic area to organize 2018 events and start building bridges between your libraries.

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