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SHELL
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The READING MAKEOVER

DANNY BRASSELL
and MIKE McQUEEN

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Chapter 3

Access: The Third Step to Reading Riches




To help students become successful readers, it is vital to provide them with enough reading materials that match their interests. In this chapter we explain the importance of reading immersion and provide a wide range of ideas and techniques that will help build your classroom's reading collection.

Resources Matter

A famous film director appeared on a national talk show. When the show's host asked the director about his views on parenting, the director confessed that his seven children presented plenty of challenges, as well as opportunities. When asked to elaborate, he shared that he viewed his primary role, as a father, was to provide his children with opportunities to succeed. The director revealed that every room of his family's home had a video camera, so whenever his children felt the urge to film, they had instant access to a video camera. What do you think the odds are that one of his children pursued a career in the entertainment industry?

Have you ever wondered why there are not many professional surfers from Nebraska or ice skaters from Kenya? Would you be surprised to learn that people without credit cards tend to spend less than those with credit cards? Resources matter. Stephen Krashen (2005) reports that the amount of reading



one does is directly correlated to the reading environment that surrounds them. In other words, the more reading resources and materials that exist within a home or classroom, the more reading its inhabitants will do. That means we must get to work building literacy-rich environments for our students because access matters.

Reading Immersion

As caring adults, we want reading to be a part of our students' everyday lives. We want students to be so excited about reading that when they talk about books, magazines, authors, or anything else reading related, their faces light up with anticipation. We want our students surrounded, immersed in attractive and engaging reading opportunities, activities, discussions, and materials. These materials need to be accessible everywhere—at home, at school, in sports facilities, in vehicles, on vacation, and any other possible opportunities.

The key components to reading immersion are: enough access to quality reading materials and the correct guidance that inspires students to obtain and read the materials. Stephen Krashen (2013) found that access leads to free voluntary reading, as well. Having access to enough quality reading materials is critically important. There is always a logical explanation that prevents students from having access to the quality and quantity of reading materials they need. Perhaps the student lives in a single-parent household where the parent has three jobs and cannot secure books or does not understand the importance of reading when basic needs are barely being met. Maybe the student is going through a family crisis, or maybe the family just relies on the school system because they feel inadequate or incapable of helping. Perhaps it is the expectation in their culture that reading happens at school. Overwhelmingly, the research suggests that students from impoverished households are at a significant disadvantage to their peers when it comes to access to books (Krashen 2005; Neuman and Celano 2001). Not only do they have fewer books in their homes, these students live in communities that have less access to books in their classrooms, schools, and even public libraries.

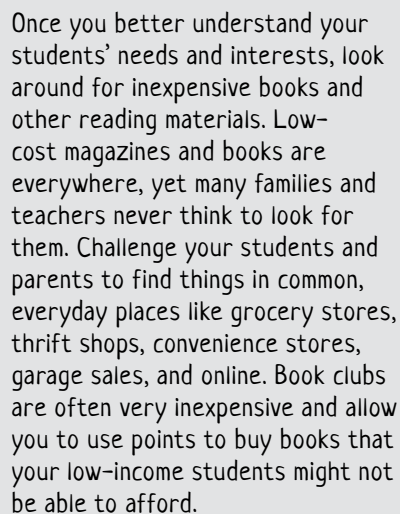
If we truly want to have a successful *reading makeover*, we need to get to the bottom of any possible barriers by thoroughly investigating each situation, clearly defining the problem, recruiting help if needed, making a plan to improve the situation, and following through to make changes and improvements. Learning about possible barriers may mean holding parent workshops, conducting a

book drive, hosting evening or weekend events, re-decorating the environment, visiting a student's home, or simply reminding students and parents to make reading part of their daily routine.

Getting Reading Materials

Both of us have a lot of experience in securing reading materials for our students. There are a number of sources to support with this endeavor, and they are not always obvious.


Be sure to take advantage of your local library where thousands of titles are available to be checked out for weeks at a time. Ideally, every student, *especially* struggling readers, should visit the library at least once a week from birth through adulthood. Write the visit into your lesson plans, stay engaged with your class during the visit (by walking around and helping students secure appropriate materials), and model how to find different materials. Better yet, ask the librarians to help. The more often you visit the library, the more your students will feel comfortable, and the more likely they will take advantage of the wonderful resources that are available. Inspire your students' families to do the same with the public library and the students' chances of becoming life-long readers are even better.



Once you better understand your students' needs and interests, look around for inexpensive books and other reading materials. Low-cost magazines and books are everywhere, yet many families and teachers never think to look for them. Challenge your students and parents to find things in common, everyday places like grocery stores, thrift shops, convenience stores, garage sales, and online. Book clubs are often very inexpensive and allow you to use points to buy books that your low-income students might not be able to afford.

Donations

Upon exhausting your limited budget, it is time to seek donations. People love to donate books, and students love receiving them. Simply put the word out there that you are looking for books to share with students. Tell everyone—



friends, family, neighbors, businesses, volunteer groups, social media, and even your own students. Creating a detailed flyer will help avoid any confusion and allow people to contact you with any questions. If you are concerned about being inundated with unsuitable materials, be sure to list qualifiers such as your target audience, suggested book topics, condition, reading level, publication dates, and so on. Before accepting any donations, make sure the donor understands that there are no expectations of how the books will be used once you receive them, noting that you may need to pass some copies along to others in need. This will avoid any misinterpretations from the donors if they follow up later on and expect to see their valuable donations on the shelf. The only condition of accepting book donations is that the giver must be fine if you are unable to use the materials and end up donating them to charity. In the “Reading Makeover Quick Tips” section of this chapter, we describe a number of sources for donations of books and other reading materials. When seeking donations, remember two important things:

- ☞ you need to ask
- ☞ have your class write a thank-you card for any donation

Don't let a lack of funding prevent you from upgrading your classroom library!

Personal Libraries

All of the donated materials you collect can be used to help students create their very own, custom-made personal libraries. A personal library does not have to be big, expensive, or fancy. For elementary school students, it can be as simple as a shoebox. Have students decorate their shoeboxes with their favorite hobbies and activities and then teach them to keep it freshly stocked with a few leisurely reading materials that they love. Explain the project to families and ask for their support. Be sure you encourage everyone to add any type of reading materials—books, magazines, comics, newspapers, Internet articles, and even eBooks. If you lack resources in students' primary language, what better way to interest them in books than to allow them to make their own books? After they write stories, songs, recipes, or dramas in their own language, they can work with a friend to translate the text. This is a great way to involve families. Struggling and reluctant readers may need extra help, so monitor them closely and help them as needed. Personal libraries give students a sense of ownership and increase their buy-in to reading, especially when given the chance to show off their creations to you or their friends.

The Game Changer

The Internet is a game changer. Anyone in the world with access to a computer and an Internet connection has access to more reading materials than everyone who lived before 1990. Do not forget that our goal is for students to read, read, and read, and then read some more. The Internet is often forgotten about or dismissed as a good source for reading materials, but the fact is that it is the biggest resource there is. With proper monitoring and some guidance, the Internet is a great way to get unlimited access to information on very specific topics that pique students' interests. Let us turn our struggling and reluctant readers into voracious information connoisseurs.

Beyond Books


Besides receiving book donations from businesses, we have found that many will donate materials they do not need. For example, since Danny's students did not have a rug to read on, he asked various carpet stores for any leftover carpets or samples that they had. Not only did he receive enough carpeting for his classroom, he received enough to carpet every classroom at his school and two others.

We have also asked for atypical items from businesses. For example, ask law firms if they would donate two hours on their copy machines. Most businesses will agree, especially if you are not soliciting their time or money.

Reading Makeover Quick Tips: Obtain Reading Materials

Danny founded a nonprofit that created school libraries in the inner-city school district where he worked. Then, he joined the Board of Directors of another nonprofit that organized over 250,000 student volunteers to conduct book drives that garnered over three million book donations. Along the way, he discovered a number of great ways to increase students' access to reading materials.

- 🌀 **Newspapers:** Newspapers are an excellent source for printed material. There is something for everyone in the newspaper, whether it is recipes for the cooks in the family, scores for the sports enthusiasts, coupons for the budget conscious, or stock prices for the financially minded. Most



major newspapers have education representatives who will arrange for each student to receive free newspapers delivered to your school each week (see <http://nieonline.com/>). In addition, these representatives usually provide packets of lesson-planning ideas and ways for teachers to incorporate newspapers into their curricula. Check out any popular breakfast meeting place and there is usually a row of newspaper stands, including many free editions. Why not grab a stack to share with your students? Better yet, why not make friends with someone at your local newspaper and ask for “day-old” or later editions of newspapers? They work just as well.

- **Service Organizations:** Almost every community boasts a variety of service organizations, such as the Rotary Club, Optimists Club, Chamber of Commerce, and Lions Club. Churches, temples, mosques, and veterans’ organizations like the American Legion are also good places to ask for book donations. We have been known to flash our identifications (like Joe Friday), informing potential donors that we are teachers who need reading materials for our students. People are usually very empathetic and are willing to help in whatever way they can.
- **Nonprofits:** A variety of nonprofit organizations specialize in providing books to teachers and students in need. Reading Is Fundamental (<http://www.rif.org/>), Reach Out and Read (<http://www.reachoutandread.org/>), First Book (<http://www.firstbook.org/>), and Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (<http://usa.imaginationlibrary.com/>) are among the finest. Public libraries and newspapers usually have lists of such organizations. For example, in Los Angeles alone there are over 800 registered nonprofit organizations that deal with literacy issues. All you have to do is to approach your helpful reference librarian and ask.
- **Bookstores:** Major book chains often offer up to 20 percent off on books for teachers, and many will donate damaged copies to teachers. Bookstores are also great for promotional materials. For example, many will donate promotional posters and book cardboard cutouts. We have received donations of *Twilight* posters, life-size *Harry Potter* displays, and *Magic Tree House* bookmarks. Again, get friendly with the employees at these places. Most will go out of their way to help you once they learn the resources they were going to discard are going to a good cause.

- ☞ **Thrift Stores/Salvation Army/Goodwill:** These stores have always supplied Danny with a ton of reading materials for free or at greatly reduced prices when he described the lack of resources at the schools he served. You'd also be surprised how far a handwritten thank-you card from your students can go with cementing long-term friendships with businesses.
- ☞ **Garage Sales/Businesses:** Most people at garage sales will donate or greatly reduce the price of books for teachers. Garage sales are potential goldmines. Remarkably, garage sales have been one of the driving forces behind our accumulation of reading materials. After we handwrite thank-you cards to folks for their kindness, we have been amazed how they spread the word among their own networks.
- ☞ **Post Office:** Whenever a person moves and leaves no forwarding address, the post office holds that person's mail for a period of time. Danny once asked his local post office if they would give him any unclaimed magazines, and they provided him with hundreds.
- ☞ **American Automobile Association:** Many AAA offices will donate used maps, pamphlets, and tour booklets to classroom teachers.
- ☞ **The Friends of the Library:** Almost every library has a Friends of the Library (FOL) program, and most FOLs hold annual book sales. Books that are not sold are often dumped because libraries do not have sufficient space for all materials. Most FOLs receive hundreds of *National Geographic* donations, and they are often glad to pass these along to teachers.
- ☞ **Junk Mail/College Info:** Danny used to get his students to telephone various companies and ask to be put on mailing lists. Soon, students were receiving loads of mail on a daily basis. Best of all, he called several universities and received a ton of free materials for students to read. A variety of offices are willing to part with printed items they no longer need.
- ☞ **Other Sources:** Think of local agencies that are willing to give documents to your classroom. For example, one teacher asked her Congresswoman to donate copies of bills and press releases to her classroom, and the Congresswoman even came to the class to read to students. In Los Angeles, Danny asked movie studios and independent producers to supply him with any scripts they did not use, and he received almost 20,000.

- ✎ **Make Your Own:** If you lack resources in students' primary language, what better way to interest them in books than to allow them to make their own books? After they write stories, songs, recipes, and so on in their own language, they can work with a friend and translate the text. This is a great way to involve parents and families, too!
- ✎ **Book Clubs/Affiliates:** When schools conduct book fairs, they earn points to purchase books for their schools. Danny organized affluent schools to donate their points to under-resourced schools. He also uses his website (www.lazyreaders.com) as an affiliate for Amazon. Anytime Danny's website readers purchase one of his book recommendations via Amazon, it donates up to 10 percent to reading charities.



LESSONS LEARNED FROM MIKE & DANNY

Danny: My parents tell me that when I was around 18-months old I would sneak into their bedroom and start tearing pages out of books in their bedroom library. They would smack me on the hands and say, "Stay away from the books, Danny."

So, like any good son, I blame my parents for my early reluctance to read. (I'm kidding, of course!)

I always hated books when I was a kid. My father was a librarian, and I always hated public libraries growing up. They bothered me. Most public libraries I ventured into had uncomfortable furniture, distinct musty smells, and grumpy old ladies who insisted I lowered my voice; and there were always some shady characters from the streets who lurked by the book stacks, making other patrons uncomfortable.

My parents both read voraciously. Mom devoured mysteries—often finishing a 200-pager in a single sitting, while Dad's typical evening fare began with the newspaper, followed by a history book, then a glance at some bestselling novel at the time, with a dash of biographies, concluding with a massive volume on some world religion. As a family, we moved often when I was a child, and I remember having to haul box after box of my parents' numerous, heavy books. Conservatively, I would guess my parents had at least 5,000 books, not to mention the stacks that they supplied my brother, sister, and me. Note: My strength as a high school athlete was not enhanced by the weight room as much as by transporting heavy piles of *Sports Illustrated*, encyclopedia sets, and *Choose Your Own Adventure* books from one home to another. In contrast, seeing my inner-city students with limited access to reading materials was completely foreign to me.



The inner-city community where I taught had a population of over 100,000 residents, yet the only bookstore in the city was a Christian bookstore. Serving nearly 30,000 students, the school district reported library caches of approximately 56,000 books—less than two books available per student (more affluent districts typically provide a *minimum* ratio of 20:1, ten times the ratio of my district). I was appalled, so I founded my own non-profit organization that focused on securing more books in the district's schools. In less than three years, my nonprofit managed to receive over 80,000 book donations, more than doubling the district's reading coffers but still falling dreadfully short of the access to materials I had as a child.

Mike: Optimist International is a volunteer organization that “works each day to make the future brighter by bringing out the best in children, in their communities, and in themselves” (www.optimist.org). The local Optimist club that served our elementary school worked very closely with us during our Reading Makeover. Each year, they helped us collect thousands of books during our six-week book drive. I attended their monthly meetings to explain our progress and the impact their efforts were having on our students. I shared my appreciation through encouraging stories and the positive effects of their book donations and volunteer work. When they learned that the book donations were causing great excitement in our school, especially with our struggling readers, they really got excited to help, collecting as many books as possible. On the final day of the book drive, I would organize the books in huge piles all over the library and then schedule each class in the school to “come and get it!” I wish you could have seen the look on our students' faces when they were allowed to take a bunch of free books. You would have thought they had just won the lottery; they were so excited and thankful. They proved what research says: access to books is important (Miller 2010).

Conclusion

Having an abundance of high-interest reading materials keeps the concept of reading fresh and exciting for students, especially struggling readers. There are many different low cost and easy ways to surround children with books and create an environment where reading is important. Your struggling readers need your help to make it happen. You can do it!



Reflection Questions

1. As you were growing up, how much access did you have to books and other reading materials? How did this impact you as a reader?
 2. Would you consider doing a book drive at your school? What local organizations could you approach to help?
 3. What ways can you help low-income, struggling readers who may not have many books at home?
 4. What other types of reading materials could you provide that are not too expensive? How can you get them in the hands of your students?
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