ReKindling an Interest in Reading with At-Risk Students

By Melissa Engel-Unruh

We have all seen it. It is the month before state standardized tests, and schools kick into high gear trying to get students ready, especially the at-risk students who are struggling academically. There are faculty meetings and student assemblies and reward programs and study sessions and last-ditch efforts in the classroom . . . all trying to ensure that “No Child is Left Behind.”

Deep down we recognize that these efforts of the spray and pray variety have no lasting effect, but schools persist in the hopes of getting a few more at-risk students over the proficiency hump. These students and their teachers are feeling the brunt of “No Child Left Behind,” trying to make meaningful academic growth with ever decreasing resources.

So what is the solution?

THE LIBRARY MEDIA CENTER AND AT-RISK STUDENTS

The answer lies in one of the most valuable resources in any school building—the school library media specialist. I know I am preaching to the choir, but we really are in a prime position to roll up our sleeves and get in the trenches working with our at-risk students. As the ultimate “resource manager,” we can contribute toward their positive academic growth in a meaningful and lasting way.

And how do we do that?

✔ By forming relationships with the teachers of these at-risk students.
✔ By listening to the concerns and struggles of the classroom teacher.
✔ By showing that school library media specialists are instructional partners with whom classroom teachers can collaborate.

✔ By demonstrating to these classroom teachers that we can teach side by side, taking some of the load of “No Child Left Behind” off their shoulders.

I am sure that you see many a classroom teacher feeling overwhelmed with the mission of getting every student proficient in reading by 2014. Last year, I was talking with two reading teachers who were bemoaning their students’ lack of motivation to read. They wondered how they could teach the necessary strategies for improving reading comprehension if they could not get their students to actually read anything. They were frustrated with the amount of time that they were spending fighting student resistance to reading.

Sound familiar?

As we mulled over how to better help these students, I stumbled upon an editorial titled “How Reading is Being Reimagined,” by Matthew Kirschenbaum. Kirschenbaum reflects on the changing nature of reading and suggests that educators must rethink reading as it applies to students today. He states “. . . new devices like Kindle suggest what I call the remaking of reading, meaning that reading is being both re-imagined and re-engineered, made over creatively as well as technologically.”

Then I had an AHA! moment. Maybe as the school library media specialist I need to “re-imagine” reading and consider ebook readers for the high school library.

KINDLES IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

I did some preliminary searching to see how many high school libraries had Kindles or other ebook reading devices. In early 2009 there were not many. But the reading teachers with whom I was collaborating thought that by giving the students a “gadget” like the Kindle, we could spark their interest and get them to read in a format that gadget-centric teens could appreciate.

Through a local grant whose focus is using creative strategies to accelerate the academic progress of at-risk students, I purchased 11 Kindles and an Amazon gift card to purchase ebooks.

When the Kindles arrived over the summer, the reading teachers and I met to lay the groundwork for how to use the Kindles with the high school’s lowest readers. We recognized that while our students could read, they opted not to read. Thus, they were choosing to be illiterate.

We considered the sage advice from two experts in the field of literacy. According to Dr. Stephen Krashen, linguist and educational researcher, “. . . children who don’t read for pleasure have an extremely tough time developing the language and literacy competencies necessary to succeed in today’s world” (Krashen). In Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It, reading guru Kelly Gallagher stresses “If we want kids to become better readers, they have to read a lot more than they are currently reading.
And if we want our students to do a lot more reading than they are currently doing, they need to be immersed in a pool of high-interest reading material” (30).

We determined that it was essential to give our students not only the time to read but also access to a large selection of books. Each week our at-risk students would have one class period to read self-selected books via the Kindle. During that time we would read as well, serving as role models for pleasure reading. At the end of each Kindle Club session, the students would engage in a post-reading activity that would piggyback on a skill that they are working on in the classroom. It was our hope that by giving students the time and encouragement to read, we would guide them toward becoming experienced, lifelong readers (Schoenbach, et al. 65).

With our plan in place, we formed Kindle Club and held our first session on Friday of the first week of school. We taught students how to use the Kindle and how to use the Amazon directory to locate books. Each week after that we taught a different feature of the Kindle and got the students engaged in talking about what they were reading via blogging, read alouds, and class discussion.

From that very first day the Kindle Club was a hit! Students were wowed with the Kindle and proclaimed how cool it was. Each week they came back excited to read on the Kindle and to learn more about how to use the device. The students slowly developed the habit of reading for pleasure, and their excitement about reading on the Kindle did not wane.

**KINDLE FEATURES FOR HELPING STRUGGLING READERS**

One of the reasons we think that Kindle Club has remained such a hit is the array of features available to help struggling readers.

First, the large selection of books available from Amazon has been a major factor in motivating our students to read. They no longer are confined to choosing from the books available in our physical library. At their fingertips they have over 690,335 ebooks (as of September 3, 2010) from which to choose. According to Krashen, this easy access to books is essential in moving our students past the basics.

While this large selection was motivating, our students needed help in identifying their own interests and figuring out what they would like to read. So the first month of school, we focused on one of the skills identified in the American Association of School Librarians' *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*: identifying one's own areas of interest (4.4.1).

The Amazon Kindle organizes the ebooks into 24 categories. Each category is then broken into subcategories. Many of the subcategories are then broken down further. For instance, if a student is interested in basketball, he would choose the sports category in the directory. From there, he would choose the subcategory of basketball. That subcategory then is broken down further into three more subcategories: college & university, general, and professional.

For the at-risk student who is not in the habit of choosing books to read, the directory streamlines the process. According to Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, Christine Cziko, and Lori Hurwitz, leaders in the Reading Apprenticeship framework by WestEd, "Recognizing what you like to read is a first step toward becoming an experienced and, eventually, a lifelong reader” (65). Through the help of Amazon's directory, our at-risk students have been much more successful in choosing books that they are interested in reading.

We also have found the immediacy factor of the Kindle to be a hit. Because the Kindle has a wireless connection to the Internet, students can shop the Amazon store from the device itself. If students find a book that they like, they can download a sample of the book for free, straight from the device. That sample, usually comprised of the first few chapters of the book, downloads onto the Kindle within 60 seconds. If the students decide that they like the book, they request it for purchase. Again, that book will appear on the Kindle in under a minute.

The Kindle also offers several innovative features to assist struggling readers including adjustable text sizes and a built-in dictionary with instant lookup. Text to Speech will read text out loud to students, allowing them to listen and read at the same time. It also offers a keyboard allowing students to highlight, bookmark, and add annotations to text.

**IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING**

We have found these many features to be most helpful in aiding our at-risk readers. The majority of our students use the Text to Speech feature, claiming that it helps them understand what they are reading better because they can hear the text while seeing it. They also purport that the Text to Speech feature and the built-in dictionary aid with their vocabulary development.

As a side benefit, we have found the ebook sharing option with the Kindle to be a superb tool for building a classroom
"The students were wowed with the Kindle and proclaimed how cool it was. Each week they came back excited to read on the Kindle and to learn more about how to use the device."

community of readers. When one purchases and downloads an ebook onto the Kindle, she then has the option to share that ebook with five other Kindles on the same account. So when students are discussing what they are reading and other students want to read the book too, all they have to do is access the archived items on their Kindle and download the book of interest. As an added bonus, the sharing feature is quite cost effective for the library. We essentially get six copies of a book for the price of one.

As a result of this collaboration, our building’s struggling readers have been motivated to read more this year than ever before. Through a survey at the start and end of the school year, we asked the students how many minutes they typically spend reading each week. There was a 12.1% increase in the amount of minutes that they spend reading. We also asked them how many books they have read over the past 12 months. There was a 31.2% increase, with some students jumping from having read just one book last year to reading more than 10 books this year.

We can say with certainty that the students are electing to read for pleasure for the first time. Additionally, their association with the school library has become a positive and rewarding one not at all associated with the stress and pressure of the classroom.

Because of the success of Kindle Club, I have invested in even more Kindles for the library’s collection. The library now has 30 second-generation Kindles and three Kindle DXs. For next school year, I am planning on purchasing a netbook cart in which to house our Kindles. I then will make the “Kindle Cart” available to take to all classroom teachers to use with their students.

By taking our Kindles “on the road,” we will be able to collaborate with more teachers and impact the literacy of even more students, ensuring that our building’s readers are NOT left behind.

SOURCES AND RESOURCES

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