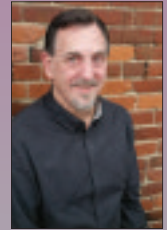


# From Reluctant Readers to Library Regulars

## *A Teacher Librarian's Intervention Plan*

JEFF TREISTMAN



“By building a reading relationship, teacher librarians can match individuals to reading material that they enjoy.”

There is nothing more dissonant to an educator's ear than a student saying, “I hate reading.” And yet I have heard this from dozens of students referred to me for a reading intervention.

In this article I share my experience in creating an intervention program offered through the school library program that shows promise for these students. The information shared is based on research on reading intervention and my work with students.

### PLANNING AN INTERVENTION

I work as a teacher librarian at Denny International Middle School in Seattle, which has a 70% poverty rate, based on free or reduced price lunches. Our school is fortunate to have an assistant principal (AP) whose work focuses solely on student literacy. In fall 2015, the AP approached me with a list of 115 (out of a school population of 900) students identified as “non-readers.” Many of the students self-reported that they don't read outside of school or that they hate reading. Some students, as identified by their teachers, were not reading during silent reading sessions. Still others were low performers on test scores, assignment grades, or both. All participants were general education students; no students in programs requiring intensive English programs or English as a second language were included. I was given a great deal of latitude to develop a non-reader intervention.

In preparing to help these students, I found there was no limit to the amount of research on this topic. Initially, I identified strategies developed by Krashen (2011) around the concept of free voluntary reading and Allington (2012) related to high success reading. I chose to focus on these approaches, because they emphasize read-

ing for pleasure, and I felt this was an overlooked area in our school. My approach as the librarian was significantly different from that of the reading teachers, which was a good thing since it allowed the use of additional strategies to reach the largest number of students.

I also consulted *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys* (Smith & Welhelm, 2002), *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males* (Tatum, 2005) and *Lifers: Learning from At-Risk Adolescent Readers* (Mueller, 2001). These resources helped me get glimpses inside the heads of students who experience barriers to reading. Through examples provided in my literature review, there were countless scenarios of unsuccessful interventions, many of which just aggravate the problem. Too often educators resort to cajoling, pleading, enticing, or insisting that a student try a particular title, or offer a limited choice, neither of which is really a choice at all, since it does not fit the student's interests.

Eventually, I came to the realization that any intervention with these students, in order to be successful, would entail a great amount of reading practice, which could stretch longer than a single school

year. What they needed was the opportunity to develop reading habits. And I needed to develop a standard to measure success in spite of severe limits to the amount of time available. So I settled on the initial goal of getting the students into the habit of reading 15 minutes every day at school. This required getting each student to a mental place to actually enjoy reading, and the first step was to figure out what they would be willing to read. The objectives of free reading intervention became:

- Students will enjoy reading, looking forward to their 15 minutes of reading.
- Students will develop the habit of reading for fun for 15 minutes every day.

## ESTABLISHING A PROTOCOL

After some trial and error, I landed on a protocol. Working within the classroom teacher's schedule, I met with students one-on-one during their language arts class. I also conferenced with the teacher, which provided additional information on the student and reinforced my working relationship with the teacher, so we could freely exchange observations and insights into the student's issues around reading.

Typically, there were two or three non-readers in each class. Language arts classes meet in two-period block sessions, and teachers work on reading for one period and writing for the other period. I met with students during silent reading for 15 minutes at a time over the course of 2 weeks. Working with one teacher at a time and cycling through the teachers by grade level, I spent about 6 weeks on each of the three grade levels.

During the first two sessions, I met with and interviewed students, beginning to build a reading relationship with each individual. I asked them specific and open-ended essential questions with follow-ups, for example: Why do you think you are on the list of non-readers? Do you think reading makes you smarter? How do you define reading? Can you read a photograph or a painting? How do you understand a story? Then I explained the plan and told them my goal was to help them find enjoyable reading.

On the second day, students took an online personality profile assessment, which accounted for multiple intelligences and learning styles. By reviewing the results together, I had the opportunity to talk to students individually about their interests and personalities, their likes and dislikes. Students enjoyed this, and it helped create trust. It also gave me valuable insight as I thought about reading recommendations based on their interests.

The third time we met, I gave them something to read that I thought might interest them, and they sat in the library to read for 15 minutes. During this time I passively observed them as they were reading. At the end of their reading session, we had a brief conversation about whether they liked my recommendation enough to continue reading it, or if it was short and they finished it, whether they would like something similar or something different to read. To measure progress, I observed:

- Number of pages read
- Body language during session
- Ability to say something about what they read

## THE SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

By the end of 2 weeks, I evaluated the progress and success of the intervention for each student. Students fell into three different categories:

1. A small number of students merely needed a wakeup call and responded immediately. They were excited about the program, and the teacher resumed monitoring them.
2. Another small number of students were referred back to the AP for further intervention. This group included some students whose barriers had never been addressed. Some had just been very good at pretending to read but had not really developed skills beyond the most basic ones taught in primary grades. Others had undetected cognitive problems or severely stressful living conditions.
3. Most students were put onto a sustained coaching routine where they checked in with me once a week to talk about their reading.

The following are two success stories from group 3.

### SAM

Sam is a very socially aware extrovert, a kinetic learner, and very involved with sports. Sam said he lost interest in reading quickly because he liked action. Like most students who share this brief profile, he was a prime candidate for comic books in the original magazine format. As a librarian, I am naturally open to a wide range of formats and genres, some of which can be a stretch for some classroom teachers. Comic books give stu-

dents who struggle with comprehension plenty of visual cues for the direction of the narrative. The sparser use of words gives the reader a chance to practice understanding in a lower-stakes reading environment. This represents exactly what many who struggle with comprehension need: practice.

Most readers can finish a comic book in 10–15 minutes, which was my target. Over several days Sam was able to finish one comic book a day, so his reading experience was satisfying on several levels. For example, he had a sense of completion; when he said, “Done!,” he looked forward to getting the next volume, and he didn’t leave the library with negative feelings. Over time, Sam transitioned to more word-dense graphic novels.

## KELLY

Kelly was on the list because she reported to her teacher that she hated reading. The teacher noted that Kelly was not performing at standard and didn’t read during silent reading and instead looked at her phone during the allocated time. From the interview I learned that Kelly was very introverted, and like many introverts, she had a vivid inner life. What her teacher didn’t realize was that she was reading fan fiction on her phone which she thought the teacher wouldn’t approve. In fact, her reading choice was written in non-standard English about the K-pop star Jung Kook. I learned that Kelly had exited English as a second language in sixth grade, when she started middle school; her teacher was unaware of this. At home, Kelly spoke Vietnamese but couldn’t read it. She felt her parents expected her to be better at English than they were since she was born in the United States.

I told Kelly that as the school librarian I consider all reading “real” reading. She could absolutely read fan fiction on her phone. I explained to her that I was most concerned about her enjoying whatever it was that she was reading. As I observed her daily, she continued reading on her phone and appeared to be focused on reading. I knew she was not playing games on the phone instead of reading. I gleaned that she was interested in relating to her Asian culture but was not assertive about it socially. Reading Jung Kook seemed a way to quietly explore her Asian identity and to feel emotions that she wasn’t able to access as a young Asian female in an American public school.

I showed her books on such things as Internet romance and fangirls; she picked one and began reading it while at the library. I usually keep whatever material I introduce to students in the library, because I want them to come to the library to read but leave with no pressure to read beyond the time allotted. The goal is to help them learn to enjoy reading, which is not something students can be pressured to do. At the end of the 2 weeks I did check the book out to her so that she could continue reading it in class. Although her pace was slow, she finished the book. She told me that it was the first book she actually finished.

For Kelly, reading fan fiction satisfied her very personal interests in a timely manner with the comfort of her phone. She was willing to try a print book once she learned what was available in her preferred genre. This is one of the biggest missing pieces; students do not know what is available. That is why the librarian is so crucial to the intervention process, since the librarian’s job is to know about reading trends and what is available.

## CONCLUSION

The highly personalized nature of this type of intervention, combined with its very broad range of issues and solutions, make it a perfect fit for teacher librarians. It is an extension of what is already within their daily activity of making recommendations for books and other resources. In this case, it is with laser focus on the individual student’s needs and preferences.

By building a reading relationship, teacher librarians can match individuals to reading material that they enjoy. The goal of turning reluctant readers into “library regulars” becomes achievable when individuals are heard and given free range to read in the open, inviting environment provided by the library.

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