

Mission Possible

We read to know we are not alone.

—C. S. Lewis

It is the first day of school and you have a mission. Imagine a fuse burning across the screen and the thump of a bass guitar from the soundtrack to “Mission Impossible.” Tap it out on your desk as you read along with me here: *bump, bump, badumpabump, bump, bump, badumpabump . . .* Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to turn your students into readers. Not just some of the kids, *all* of the kids. You have 180 days.

Okay, not really; there might be a few interruptions. The fuse burns no matter what. You’re going to need every minute you can scrape up to make this happen. This is the most important work you will do as a teacher.

You get one year to make a mark.

You get one year to infect each child with a *need* to read, with a belief that it matters, with the desire to turn off the Celtics and pick up a book.

It’s true: few teachers succeed. You’ve seen the reports. From the National Endowment for the Arts, “The number of 17-year-olds who *never* read for pleasure increased from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004 . . . only 30 percent of 13-year-olds read almost every day” (Mehegan, 2007).

What are the numbers in your room? Who sets aside Guitar Hero and collapses into the couch with a novel for 30 minutes or an hour? I ask questions at the start of each school year: *Tell me about the great books you’ve read in the last year. What words or phrases do you hold in your heart? Which books have you read lately that you want to*

read again? Some students look at me like I’m a sandwich short of a picnic, for sure. Every year I get some of the same answers.

Alan stopped reading in eighth grade. He remembers he used to read, but now he doesn’t have time for it. He loved war books because he was curious about his father’s service in Vietnam, but there weren’t any war books in English class. Novels and poetry and Shakespeare took over in high school, and it was all so far outside of his interests at 14 that he refused to try anymore. And really, who at 14 has the maturity to choose differently? It was book after book, month after month, nothing that he wanted to read. He skimmed SparkNotes to pass his classes, but by 11th grade, he’d dropped to the lowest level in English. He wouldn’t read the classics, so they were read to him. Alan no longer saw himself as a reader because he wasn’t motivated to read within the narrow space we allowed.

Emily said, “Reading was something that I didn’t really take time to do. My reading level was below my grade level. I carried books to make it look like I was reading them and would never really read them.” Alicia said, “The last book I read? You mean actually *read*? *The Lovely Bones* [Sebold, 2004] in sixth grade. Oops. All those other books were boring; even on SparkNotes they were boring.” Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, summarized the report I mentioned above by saying, “We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading.”

And yet with shelves of organized books, daily book and author talks, contagious passion, and choice, my students cannot get enough books. Our library is often in disarray from all of the stu-

dents who paw its shelves. The truth is, I simply *expected* Alan to develop a reading habit in the semester I had him as a student. I asked him to find books he wanted to read, and if he didn't want to put other things aside to read it, it was probably the wrong book. Each day in class, I gave him 10 minutes to enjoy his choice, and I talked about books that I thought he might connect to. Alan always had his book for class, read two hours a week outside of it, and became that motivated student we seek. He visited bookstores when he couldn't find the war memoirs from Iraq that he craved. He read 5 books in 18 weeks in my room, more than he had read in the prior three years.

I saw him in the hall this week, book in hand. "Hey, Alan, what are you reading?"

He smiled, sneaking his hat behind his back. "How ya doin', Mrs. Kittle." He held his book out to me, "*Ghost Soldiers*. It's by that same guy that wrote *Blood & Thunder*, but I think this one would be a little too violent for you."

"Ah, Hampton Sides, brilliant writer. I actually read the first section of *Ghost Soldiers* and gave it to my husband. I want to get back to it, though."

"Oh, you should. It's excellent." He shows me he's halfway through; we both know what this means—it's not an assignment, and he's still reading.

"Alan, what class do you have now?"

"None; I'm done with English in high school. This is for study hall."

Alan's a reader again. I believe when we find that balance that allows for student interests as well as ours, we're more likely to see it happen.

Do we believe all can be brought into The Literacy Club? Do we not only believe it, but act upon it, and challenge all of the ways our depart-

ments or curriculum or schools prevent kids from earning admission there? I feel the thumping of that bass beat in my heart when I think about our time with teenagers. It's now or never for some. For too many. For 7,000 teenagers that will drop out of high school each day of this year (Jackson & Cooper, 2007).

The fuse is burning.

Nancie Atwell (2007) said, "For students of every ability and background, it's the simple miraculous act of reading a good book that turns them into readers, because even for the least experienced, most reluctant reader, it's the one good book that changes everything. The job of adults who care about reading is to move heaven and earth to put that book into a child's hands."

I believe *you* can make it happen.

This year. Today. Right now.

References

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