

STOKING THE READING FLAME WITH PERSONALIZED BOOK BASKETS

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“This is how I show my students that I love them—by putting books in their hands, by noticing what they are about, and finding books that tell them, ‘I know. I know. I know how it is. I know who you are, and even though we may never speak of it, read this book, and know that I understand you.’ ” (Miller 2014, 173).

When I was new to my current school and to my role as a middle-school librarian, I read *The Book Whisperer* by Donalyn Miller and *Reading in the Wild* by Miller, Susan Kelley, and Teri S. Lesesne and was inspired to model much of my school library around Donalyn Miller’s practices. One of Miller’s easily actionable ideas for helping students learn their reading preferences and choose a book in *Reading in the Wild* is creating preview stacks (2014). She begins by asking students about their preferred genres and gathering information about what they are looking for in their next book. She then draws on her collection knowledge to gather five to ten books for students to preview. Students are under no obligation to choose from the pile but can freely decide what to keep and what to set aside.

Inspired by this program, I had the idea of creating personalized book

baskets for students, informed by a simple questionnaire. I wanted to launch this new service for several reasons:

- I wanted to help struggling readers find titles that would ignite enthusiasm for reading.
- I wanted to encourage students to try genres and diverse authors that they might not normally choose, broadening their reading horizons.
- I hoped that the process would allow me to get to know students on a deeper level and that the baskets would communicate my understanding and support of students as individuals.

In addition, it couldn’t help but be fun for students to receive a customized book basket.

It is easy to replicate this program, and I blogged about this concept on the *Nerdy Book Club* blog (Williams 2021). In this article, I share my process and tips in detail. Since school libraries continue to deal with the impact of COVID-19 and since there are circumstances in which virtual baskets are preferable to print versions, I offer ideas for how to create and share virtual book baskets.

How It Works

With a working knowledge of your collection, putting together individualized book baskets is easy. It begins with a simple index card; however, you could also design a brief online form if you’d prefer. I have used a Google Form in the past but decided I preferred the simplicity of the index card. Handing any interested student a card, I ask them to write their name and grade along the top and information about themselves, including:

- Favorite books and authors
- Favorite genres
- If they have any genres, books, or authors they definitely do not like

I also suggest that they list:

- Favorite movies
- Favorite hobbies
- Things they especially like learning about and doing, both in and out of school

I advise, “If there are certain subjects you definitely are not interested in, you can tell me about those too.” I tell them, “The more you can tell me specifically about yourself, the better your book basket is likely to be!”



Once I have students' completed index cards, I grab plastic book bins and fill them with both fiction and nonfiction titles, usually between 10 and 15 books, that I think students will enjoy based on the information they supplied. I include titles I feel certain they will gravitate to as well as genres and titles that they might not think to try but that I have a hunch they might like based on their index card responses. I stick their index card out of the top of a book in their basket so the students and I can clearly see their names and identify who the basket belongs to.

No-Pressure Basket Browsing

After I fill a student's basket and deliver it to them, I reassure them that they are under no pressure to take the books in their basket. Just as Miller tells her students when she hands them a preview stack, I make it clear that I have no expectation that they must love all the books I choose. The basket is offered completely as a gift: take or leave what they will.

When I have a "ready buyer" on a title, they take precedence. My experience is that if a student hasn't plucked out a book from a basket in two or three weeks, chances are slim that they will come looking for it later.

Students can hold onto the books in their basket for a week or two. After that point, the books may be reshelfed to free up baskets, or I might need to hand the books along to others who want them. In fact, if I have a student who ardently wants a book that's in someone else's basket, even though the basket was only created a few days before, I will check that book out to that student on the spot. The basket contains enough other pleasures to keep the basket owner reading for a

while. When I have a "ready buyer" on a title, they take precedence. My experience is that if a student hasn't plucked out a book from a basket in two or three weeks, chances are slim that they will come looking for it later. I explain to the students that this is my process.




Students choose the books they would like to leave in their baskets for future consideration, which books they want to check out on the spot, and which books do not interest them. These books will be reshelfed and put back into circulation. I don't think I have ever made a basket for a student where they didn't walk away without at least two books that they want to read.

Know Your Population and Plan Your Timing

When I first introduced the option of book baskets, I learned that I needed to stagger my book basket rollout. I made the mistake of introducing the new system simultaneously to the fifth and sixth grades, and nearly every student in both grades wanted one and was eager for their basket to be completed immediately. It was not long before I ran out of baskets. Timing considerations matter more with students in younger grades. I find that requests from older middle-school students are more sporadic and easy to manage.

When launching your own book basket service, consider the age, independence, and enthusiasm levels of your patrons when deciding the population you want to launch the service to. Older patrons tend to be more inclined to wait patiently for their baskets. Immediacy is the order of the day with younger students.



If your school has a large population, the thought of managing this kind of program might seem impossible. There are several options for making a book basket program work with a large student body. First, you won't know what the demand will be until you try it. You could begin a trial run, telling only one class

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about the program and seeing how many requests you receive from that class. If you only receive a few basket requests, you can begin to spread the word.

Another option is to offer book baskets on a case-by-case basis, suggesting baskets to students you interact with individually who are struggling to determine what to read next. You can offer the baskets to students about whom teachers and parents have expressed concern in terms of their level of reading engagement. You could create a schedule in which you advertise book baskets to only certain portions of your population at particular times of the year. This is similar to what I do in choosing to announce book baskets to one grade at a time.

Other Considerations for Book Baskets

Before embarking on a similar program, you'll want to consider the time and labor involved and have a plan for who will reshelve the books that students do not select. I would not be able to offer this option to students if it were not for my faithful volunteers. My volunteers are willing to reshelve the books that students set aside. Their willingness to do this allows me to continue this program

without an excessive pile-up of discarded books from baskets.

In addition, if you want to roll out a book basket initiative, you will have to make peace with the fact that you may not be able to find books in your collection. Many a day I have to dig through a basket because I suspect I put a book in Aiden's basket that Maya now requests, and Aiden has left the book in his basket.

Student, Parent, and Teacher Responses

During the early years of this program, I noticed a student showed typical reading avoidance behavior, trying hard to distract himself and his peers during reading time because he didn't identify as a reader. I pulled together a basket full of humorous and slightly mischievous books—books he wouldn't expect me to pick out—and delivered them in a basket with the reminder that he was under no pressure to take them. I saw him smile for the first time in a while, and he went on to choose many titles from his basket. He often reported back that he liked the selections in his basket. I have seen this scenario repeatedly play out, with reluctant readers admitting that there are titles in their baskets that fit their interests and opening themselves up to give the books a try.

The feedback I have received from parents attests to the power of the baskets. A parent approached me during the first year of book basket commissions to tell me how her son hated reading, but he came home from school the previous week elated. She relayed that her fifth-grader had exclaimed, "Ms. Williams gave me a book basket full of books picked out especially for me!" She beamed, "It was like it was Christmas to him!" Her son found a book in that basket that changed his attitude toward reading for the remainder of his middle-school career. He realized

that it wasn't reading he objected to but rather the particular books he had encountered up to that point. He just hadn't found his perfect fit yet.

When parents contact the school to express concern that their child is not reading enough, I create a basket and will often e-mail a list of some of the titles (or a photograph of the titles) to the parents for their reference. Parents are grateful to see what books fit their child's reading preferences so that they can steer their child in those directions and can purchase similar books for gifts.

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Book baskets also make a strong back-to-school night presentation, particularly when I have two or three pre-made baskets on display to show parents, explaining my process. Many times parents indicate that they would like a book basket for themselves.

Book baskets are also a wonderful tool for collaborating and problem-solving with classroom teachers. Teachers request that I make personalized book baskets when they have students who are not engrossed in their books during silent sustained reading or who have difficulty choosing or committing to independent reading books. Sometimes I make book baskets for teachers so they can experience the pleasure of a personalized book basket and can see firsthand how the process works.

Book Baskets in the Time of COVID and Beyond: Going Virtual

As we returned to campus in the fall of 2020, I thought book baskets would not be an option. During the 2020–2021 school year, students

were not allowed to browse books since any books that were touched needed to be quarantined.

Sometime in September, the topic of book baskets came up during a sixth-grade library period, and I explained with regret that baskets would not be possible. A student declared, "You should make virtual book baskets!" At this I paused and asked, "Really? You would still like a basket if I sent it as a virtual list of book recommendations?" "Sure!" students eagerly responded. And so I developed virtual book baskets.

It's worth noting that a virtual basket does not require the reshelving of books and the basket can exist for far longer than a physical basket.

If your library uses Follett's Destiny Library Manager for its management software, you can create a personalized "Collection" within Destiny for each requesting student. You simply select titles for the student within Destiny and add them to the collection, sharing the link for the collection by e-mail with the student, teacher, or parent. Within each collection, the books you select will display with their book covers and descriptions, making it easy for students to decide which books in their baskets are the right fit for them. You can give the collection a title such as "Isha's Virtual Book Basket!" and choose an individual color scheme and cover photo for each collection.

If your library management software does not support this kind of collection making, you might consider using a free content curation service, such as Pearltrees, to create collections where you can save book covers and descriptions and reviews of recommended books for each student. Pearltrees allows you to save web content, such as a



Goodreads book description page or a publishing house blurb, for a book within a Pearltrees "Collection." You can then share that collection as a single link, allowing students to view the covers, descriptions, and reviews like a "playlist," which is a more compelling and interactive option for students than viewing a text-only list of titles or links. It is likely that you have your own favorite content curation software that you favor, and so consider how you might use it to create virtual book baskets.

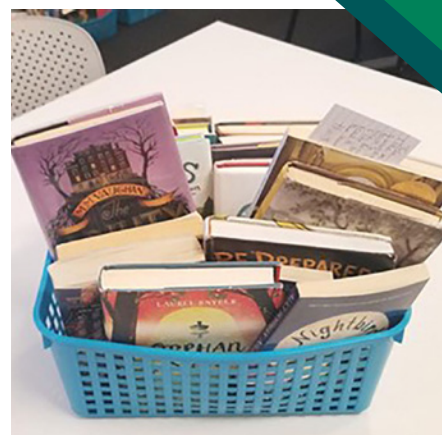
Hand the students their books in a basket, and it's like you're giving them a very personal and thoughtful present.

Maximum Impact and Joy

When considering whether to offer something involving as much time and labor as these baskets, it is natural to wonder whether the same response and benefits are achievable by offering students printed recommended reading lists or simply handing them a preview stack of books. Many reading promotion strategies work well in getting students to make a book selection. I have run various reading promotion initiatives such as speed book dating, genre personality quizzes, blind-date-with-a-book celebrations, and more, largely modeled after the work of Leigh Collazo (Mrs. Reader-pants online) and other librarians I follow. Each one has been joyful and beneficial. However, while the other reading programs are appreciated and have been met with some success, there is something truly magical about the baskets. Hand the students their books in a basket, and it's like you're giving them a very personal and thoughtful present.

The baskets have their own power. Something about the encapsulation of books make these book recommendations feel gift-like. I wonder if the same effect would be achieved with a book bag. Perhaps it is the fact that a basket is less expected and is attached to celebratory connotations such as picnic baskets and holiday gift baskets. I can't explain it, but I certainly have felt joy at witnessing the magical response of students to their baskets.

My basket service is the only program I run every year because it is the most-requested service and I believe it to be the most effective. Of all the initiatives I have undertaken as a school librarian, this is the one that continuously pays big dividends. The book basket program has supercharged my understanding of my students' individual interests and reading profiles, has helped me get to know my collection inside and out, and has built a rapport with students, teachers, and parents. What's more, the students and I have full-on fun with the process. They love telling me about themselves: their likes and dislikes and commis-



sioning me to design these "baskets of wonder," as they are sometimes affectionately termed.

I delight in reading what the students share about themselves and communicating that I see, understand, and love them by gifting them with these very personalized book baskets. Is it time intensive and labor intensive? Sure. But you will never regret investing in your students and their reading lives in this way. No matter how many baskets I make, in person or virtual, I find the experience richly rewarding. I cannot imagine doing this library life without this service. I hope that you, too, will discover the magic of the baskets.

Works Cited:

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