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Reading Buddies: Motivation and Increased Skills

Shanna Crosby-Wilson

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Abstract

Young children as well as older children reap the benefits of reading buddies programs that are being implemented throughout schools and libraries across the United States. Older students practice reading fluency and vocabulary skills, while younger children grow to love books and learn to feel more comfortable reading aloud in front of others. This paper will outline the many benefits of a reading buddies program, discuss programs already in place and give examples of student experiences.

Reading Buddies: Motivation and Increased Skill

Reading is a huge part of everyday life, especially when you are in school. Struggling readers are often discouraged in all aspects of their education because it has an effect in all curricular areas. The only way to truly increase your reading skills and abilities is to read, but many students lack the motivation and simply the time to practice. By instating a reading buddies program in the school, students are given the opportunity to practice reading in a no pressure situation with someone who truly enjoys listening to them read, even if it isn’t on-grade level materials.

Implementing Reading Buddies

*Research*

Many school have begun to use the reading buddies program to encourage students to read. With high stakes testing in reading and a heavy curriculum, teachers have to find creative ways to encourage students to practice reading as well as encourage a life long love of reading, so that it is not viewed as simply something they do for school or something that is done without any joy.

Reading aloud naturally increases oral fluency. If a student wants to become a better basketball player by improving his dribbling, he practices dribbling. The only way to get better is by practice. One cannot improve by watching or wishing, they must take part in the act and make it happen. By giving students a no pressure situation to sit back and practice reading, their skill level naturally goes up.

In a small, rural, Title 1 South Carolina school called Cainhoy, most of the 4th graders are struggling readers. A reading buddies program was instated in correlation with education students from the College of Charleston in the hopes of providing them with a relationship to enhance their feelings of belonging and engagement. Each session lasted seven weeks and the only stipulation was that the read aloud time was split in half, so each partner had a turn reading aloud to the other. At the end of each seven-week session, student’s oral reading fluency level went up an average of just over 20 points. Students were excited to come to school on the reading buddy days and saw a significant increase in their reading skills (Gutshall, 2009, 436).

Reading buddies can also be a way to improve student’s self esteem while increasing their reading skills. Often students who are struggling don’t like to read aloud for fear of sounding stupid or dumb in front of their peers. They may pass when it is their turn to read aloud in class or play class clown to keep the attention off of their reading skills. The reading buddy program can be a way to improve a student’s self-efficacy. “Self-efficacy is one critical intrinsic motivator. If self-efficacy is optimized for struggling students, then motivation and persistence to read may follow” (Friedland & Truesdell, 2006, p.36).

There are many different age groups that reading buddies can incorporate. The easiest way to implement the program is by using two different grade levels within the same school. The program explained above used college students who received a stipend for their time to travel and read with 4th grade students. Another program asked retired citizens in their community to volunteer to come after school and on weekends to meet with students who needed help in reading. Still another reading buddy program was created with Learning Disabled sixth and seventh graders serving as reading buddies/mentors for second graders. Utilizing who you can, either inside the school, or reaching out into the community will give you the most opportunity to create a strong program in order to see the most growth in your students.

*Reading Buddies in the Library*

Using the school library as a meeting place for reading buddies is a natural choice. It gives students and their partners a quiet space to concentrate on reading without distractions. It also provides a plethora of books to choose from. If the current book that is being read is losing its flavor, a new one can be quickly chosen without much reading time lost. It can also serve the purpose of giving the struggling readers a chance to become comfortable in a library setting. Students who struggle with reading are often wary of the library and the books that it holds. If provided with a comfortable setting, students will become more and more comfortable inside the library doors.

Cooperation between teachers is a large piece of the successful implementation of this program. In order for it to successfully raise student’s reading levels and increase self esteem, it need to be done on a weekly basis, which entails a larger time commitment for all involved. Teaching time will be given up if the program is to take place during school hours, but the benefits far outweigh the loss of instructional time. If the program is set up as an after school or weekend activity, it will be more of a collaboration between parents and whoever is in charge of the program during the meeting times. As a teacher, it would be easiest to oversee the program and ensure a more successful outcome if time was taken each week to meet at a scheduled time during school hours.

Minimal planning would need to take place after the initial set up of the program. The most complicated piece would be to find who would be willing to participate and which days/times would work the best for all involved. As stated earlier, the easiest way to set it up would be to look at different grade levels within the same building, which would eliminate the need for after school or weekend hours as well as transportation issues. At Picotte Elementary School in Omaha, Nebraska, the fourth grade classes pair up with the first grade classes. This program has been running since the building opened and the students love it. It is scheduled twice per every ten-cycle days between the four classrooms for each grade. They usually read in one classroom or another, but sometimes they read in the library or the hallways if they need a quiet space. The only stipulation is that each student takes turns reading so that each receives an equal amount of time for reading practice.

At Buffett Middle School, also in Omaha, the fifth and sixth grade teams loop their students so that they have the same group for two years at a time. They are required to complete a service-learning project each year. The 5A team decided in 2008 that they would like to travel to an Educare building in downtown Omaha to read with the preschoolers that attend the school. Many of the children who attend Educare are lower income students that are in need of extra help in beginning their education. Once a month for the duration of two year, the entire team of 150 plus students and their teacher traveled by bus to spend an hour with their preschool aged partners. They also instated a book drive for gently used books so that they could bring a book to share with their partners and give it to them to keep once they were done. A program such as this one would take much more planning, as well as funding for busses and books, but still can be done with minimal strain. The students in this program could not reciprocate with reading time, but they did find a partner for two years who they knew cared about them, spent time with them reading and at least were exposed to new vocabulary.

*Student Insight*

Reading Buddies is the highlight of many students’ week at Picotte Elementary in Omaha. Grace Simpson, a fourth grader in Tom Tingwald’s fourth grade class looks forward to seeing her reading buddy and reading with them each week. “I love to read with my buddy!” Grace said, “I really like picking out a book that I think she will like and reading to her. I like helping her read the books she brings too, it makes me feel like I am helping her to get better every time we read” (Grace Simpson, personal interview, November 2, 2010). Grace also spoke about how she enjoyed reading aloud to her partner rather than reading to herself. She stated that “it doesn’t seem like work when you are reading to a student who is younger than you are, it seems more like a fun time.”

Brooke Sorenson, now a seventh grader at Buffett Middle School described her feelings pertaining to her experience reading to her preschool buddy at Educare. She thoroughly enjoyed each and every trip downtown, even thought the bus ride often took over half an hour, especially in the wintertime. She thought that it was fun to step outside the classroom and practice their reading skills in a more real life situation rather than just inside the classroom walls. “My buddy was so excited to see me, she would smile and jump up and down when we got there each time. I was really sad if she was ever sick on one of our buddy days because that meant that I didn’t have anyone to read to” (Brooke Sorenson, personal interview, November 3, 2010). Both girls enjoyed their time with their reading buddies, it gave them a chance to get out of the classroom and use the skills they practice everyday in reading. The excitement of the reading buddies clearly shows the enthusiasm of the younger partners as well. It serves as a mentorship in a way as well, as the older students are providing a solid role model for the younger students to look up to, one who shows them a strong, older student who loves to read.

Reading Buddies provides a new, interactive way for students to practice reading, increase vocabulary and reading fluency at the same time. They learn to be confident in their reading skills and make new friends at the same time. Students of all ages can benefit from the experience, as well as foster a new love of reading, for themselves and others, at the same time.

References

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