THE EFFECTS OF BOOK CLUBS ON THE READING ATTITUDES OF MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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This article reports the results of study of the effects of book clubs on the reading attitudes of middle school students. The problem addressed by this study arises from the research indicating that interest, competence, and motivation related to reading begin to wane in the middle grades. The researchers sought to determine whether or not the implementation of an independent book club could influence the attitudes of middle school students in relation to these areas. Sixty middle school students in two schools were invited to participate in an independent book club once a week for one semester. An attitude survey was administered to all participants at the beginning and end of the book club. The results indicated that exposure to book clubs has a positive effect on students who have a resistance to reading. This led the researchers to the conclusion that independent book clubs are beneficial to middle school students and establishes a need for independent book clubs.

Background of the Study

The moniker “book club” conjures up visions of middle-aged adults gathering to discuss a literary classic, or the latest Oprah recommendation over wine and cheese. However, non-classroom or independent book clubs of all sorts have recently been developing in schools across the country. These clubs have varied goals. Some clubs attempt to involve parents or serve as a venue for teacher professional development, while still others were used to motivate reluctant readers (Beers 1996, Mitchel & Harris, 2001, Zaleski & Weil, 1999). The primary focus of these initiatives is the advancement of adolescent literacy. The purpose of this article is to describe one such initiative.

Need for the Study

Interest, competence, and motivation in reading and language arts decline as adolescents enter middle school (Guthrie, 2001; Wigfield, Eccles, Maclver, Reuman, & Midgley, 1991). Sadly the situation does not improve. By the time students enter high school many do not see themselves as readers and view reading as a chore after being forced to read in middle school (Early, Fryer, Leckee, & Walton, 2004). Introducing a book club to middle school students may be a way to combat this trend and address issues of motivation and adolescent development.

Purpose for the Study

George (2004) posits that implementa-
tion of a book club is one way of meeting the goal to address young adolescents’ intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development set forth by the National Middle School Association. This is a worthy goal and one that should be explored. It is evident that methods are needed which promote venues for students to read and discuss text (Harmon & Wood, 2001).

Much has been written that promotes the use of book clubs in reading and language arts classrooms (Daniels, 1994, 2001; McMahon, Raphael, Gaoately, & Pardo, 1997). Independent book clubs, held outside of the classroom, should also be promoted. Harmon and Wood (2001) explain that book clubs in the classroom provide for lively conversations among groups of students and their peers. Additionally book clubs help to expand students’ understanding and appreciation of the books read. Book clubs that emphasize reading as an experience rather than an academic task can attract students, even reluctant ones, to participate because they view the club as a social event rather than the typical demands of daily classroom assignments (Mitchel & Harris, 2001). Roller and Beed (1994) agree, adding that “Good exchanges and discussions help build feelings of competency, acceptance, and motivation that provide an entry point for less able readers to the literate world.” P.510. The significance of being a member of the club was documented years ago by Hinchman (1917) when he proposed that students given the choice of participating in a reading club, rather than a traditional literature class, chose the club which resulted in greater levels of independent reading.

Although the choice to participate in a book club is important, the freedom to select books read by book club members is central to success. It is important that students at all ranges of reading ability be given the opportunity to select books that stimulate their interest based on their own personal criteria. Choice in text selection empowers readers and thereby promotes literacy development. Readers are, by nature, prone to discuss books that appeal to them which leads to deeper discussion and an expansion of their perspective and opinions (Johnson, Giorgis, and Brown, 2003). Roller & Beed (1994) concur by adding that enthusiastic involvement with books is important as it may provide a venue for students to enter the world of well-read discussion and literary engagement.

Engagement is critical because it contributes to motivation. Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, and Rice (1996) found engaged readers to be motivated, strategic, knowledgeable, and socially interactive. Engaged readers are motivated to comprehend. They use knowledge to proactively create new understanding from text, and they interact socially in their approach to literacy. Guthrie (2001) believes that social motivation for reading relates to interpersonal relationships because children who discuss books with a community of peers are likely to be motivated readers. Using the name book “club” and focusing on the experience rather than achievement may attract reluctant readers because students view the club as a social gathering and a brief reprieve from the demands of the classroom (Dias-Mitchel & Harris, 2001). Harmon and Wood (2001) believe book
club participation provides opportunities to reinforce and expand understanding, knowledge, and appreciation for adolescent literature. Additionally, Dias-Mitchell & Harris (2001) point out that the book club meetings they observed seemed to strengthen school-community relationships and encouraged new friendships. This social interaction, an outgrowth of the book club meeting, surprised researchers Zaleski, Duvall, & Weil (1999) when they noted how quickly student discussion fell into a natural tempo.

The social aspect of the book club is not limited to interactions between students. Adult exchanges through modeling, oral explanation, and reinforcements may also promote social success (Dias-Mitchell & Harris, 2001). Zeece (2004) reports that when adults share literature, they offer children the opportunity to develop listening comprehension and appreciative thinking skills. When adults share books that are personal favorites, it helps students identify with the idea of books as a part of life and not just a part of school. Thereby, demonstrating the richness and fulfillment that books can bring to their life.

Book clubs, whether independent or in the classroom, offer a wealth of interactions between students and possibly adults. These interactions in turn promote a rich social environment in which students are provided a choice of reading materials, opportunities to share, support from peers and adults, and a sense of belonging. This social environment provides a foundation for reading enjoyment which leads ultimately to greater motivation and increased reading. The bottom line is that in order for adolescents to become more proficient readers, they must read and read a lot (Rasinski, 2003). Increased access to books, like those provided by book clubs, leads to an increase in independent reading (Morrow, 1992; Houle & Montmarquette, 1984). Whitehead (2004) informs us that students involved in independent reading demonstrate increases in vocabulary, recognition of authors and book titles, state-mandated test scores, mastery of writing, and endurance in reading act. It would appear that book clubs may provide an avenue for meeting the goal of increased adolescent literacy achievement.

The independent book club described in this study attempted to provide middle school students with opportunities to voluntarily read and discuss books of their choice in a social setting with peers and adults. This was done in an attempt to determine if this type of book club might positively impact student attitudes toward reading. This article reports the results of the study.

**Methodology**

**Participants**

Participants consisted of sixty middle school students at two local middle schools who volunteered to participate in a book club offered one day per week before the school day began. Middle school students were randomly divided into small groups and assigned to a middle level intern from a local university. The middle level interns were enrolled in Internship I as part of a professional education block of courses prior to their semester of student teaching. The middle level interns functioned as
adult participants in the group by reading adolescent books and discussing them along with the middle school students.

Survey Instrument
The attitude instrument used in this study consisted of ten questions using a Likert-type response scale asking participants to strongly agree, agree, render no opinion, disagree, or strongly disagree with statements about their attitudes toward reading. The questions, developed by the researchers, were based on the International Reading Association’s Position Statement on Adolescent Literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). The survey was administered at the first and the last meetings of the book club. The students were given unlimited time to complete the 10 questions.

Treatment
The treatment for all participants was the weekly meeting of the book club. For the purposes of this study, book club is defined as a voluntary weekly meeting of middle level students. In a traditional book club, members meet within the classroom to discuss books, often the same book. Rather than limit the students to focus on one book at a time, and to address various reading levels, a more individualized approach was used. Facilitators and students talked about books they were currently reading in hopes of encouraging other club members to read the book.

The book club met each Wednesday before school and lasted for approximately 25 minutes. The club met each week for one semester with the exception of the day before Thanksgiving, a school holiday.

In the sessions, middle level interns modeled their own enthusiasm about reading as they shared adolescent books currently being read. They delivered book talks and encouraged the students to do the same.

Results and Analysis
At the beginning and end of the semester, students completed the survey instrument. A log of the total amount of time each participant spent participating in the book club was kept in order to track changes in attitudes, as well as determining any correlation between participation time and each attitudinal statement. Scores were totaled per statement and per survey instrument for each participant. General statistical analysis was completed based on the data. Correlational analysis (Pearson and Spearman’s rho) was conducted using in relation to time and overall survey score and time and individual statement. The following tables outline the results of the data analysis.

A negative correlation (2-tailed at a .01 level of significance) was indicated by Pearson (-.684) and by Spearman’s rho (-.603) for the total score pre-survey variable and the total score difference variable comparison. This indicated that if a participant’s pre-survey total score was high then the total score difference was low. Therefore, the reverse is also true, which leads us to believe that those participants who had low (negative) attitudes demonstrated the greatest change during the book club experience. This data supports the conclusion that simple exposure to book clubs has a positive effect on students who have a resistance to reading.
Table 1
Analysis of Mean Per Survey Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Pre-Participation Mean</th>
<th>Post-Participation Mean</th>
<th>Difference Score Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) I have access to many types of reading materials.</td>
<td>3.2637</td>
<td>3.6289</td>
<td>.5556</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Reading helps me think for myself.</td>
<td>3.2778</td>
<td>3.4945</td>
<td>.2121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Reading makes me feel good about myself.</td>
<td>3.2184</td>
<td>3.5506</td>
<td>.3636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) I hope to be a reader my entire life.</td>
<td>3.6105</td>
<td>3.7835</td>
<td>.2424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Reading helps me identify with people who are different than me.</td>
<td>3.1039</td>
<td>3.4253</td>
<td>.5960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Adults in my school help me select reading materials.</td>
<td>2.6429</td>
<td>3.2778</td>
<td>.6566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Adults in my school like to read.</td>
<td>2.9464</td>
<td>3.8085</td>
<td>.8586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Adults in my school can help me improve my reading ability.</td>
<td>3.2526</td>
<td>3.5474</td>
<td>.2828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) I always have a choice in what I read.</td>
<td>3.3936</td>
<td>3.7551</td>
<td>.4949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Reading is important to me.</td>
<td>3.6364</td>
<td>3.7475</td>
<td>.1313</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2
Correlation Analysis for Questions 1,3, & 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Pearson</th>
<th>Level of significance</th>
<th>Spearman’s rho</th>
<th>Level of significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) I have access to many types of reading materials.</td>
<td>-.322</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.259</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Reading makes me feel good about myself.</td>
<td>-.275</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.222</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) I hope to be a reader my entire life.</td>
<td>-.364</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.256</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A positive correlation (2-tailed at a .01 level of significance) was also indicated by Pearson (.394) and by Spearman’s rho (.282) in regard to the time variable and the total score pre-survey variable. This tells us that those participants who had high (positive) attitudes regarding reading in the beginning tended to choose to spend more time being involved in the book club. This result is not surprising given the fact that those participants initially expressed an appreciation for reading.
Most surprising was the effect of time on those participants who initially had a negative attitude toward reading. Analysis indicated a negative correlation (2-tailed .01 level of significance) by both Person (-.488) and Spearman rho (-.374) in evaluating the total score difference variable and the time variable. This indicates a high/low, low/high relationship. This leads to the conclusion that greater changes in attitudes were evident in those students who spent little time in the book club. Based upon a combination of correlations, it was concluded that those students who spent the least amount of time and initially had the worst attitudes about reading changed the most.

Once the total score variables were addressed, each question was then evaluated for trends (correlations) in regard to the difference score variable for that question and the overall time spent by the participant. This analysis uncovered significant (.01 and/or .05) negative correlations for three questions (questions 1, 3, & 4). These questions targeted access to reading materials and self-reflection attitudes.

Based on the negative correlation for question one, participants indicated that they did not have access to a variety of reading materials. Since the school library media center houses the majority of the reading materials that all students would have access to, this finding has strong implications on the collection development for libraries.

Question three also had a negative correlation. This question specifically targets self-actualization. What is exciting about these results is that although the attitudes of participants spending large amounts of time participating in the book club did not change, the attitudes of those participants spending very little time indicated an increase in overall self-worth in regards to reading in general. Therefore, anytime spent by reluctant readers in a book club environment had a positive impact.

Question four indicated a negative correlation. This question targeted life-long learning. Just as was the case with question three, the attitudes of participants that spent large amounts of time participating in the book club did not change, but the attitudes of those spending very little time in book club indicated an increase in overall interest in life-long learning.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Study

The effect of exposure to an independent book club on the attitudes of struggling readers was clearly evident. Finding opportunities for struggling readers to become involved in book clubs and having other students serve as models are key factors to success. Participation in the book club provided all students with the opportunity to realign their initial attitudes regarding the benefits of reading. It was also evident that students felt they did not have a variety of reading materials. This point has implications for the school library media center. It could be that the centers contained poorly developed collections, the centers’ policies may have promoted limited access to books, or the centers’ collections were inadequately promoted. Further study might include an investigation of the practices library media centers located in middle schools.
References


Roller, C.M. & Beed, P.L. (1994). Sometime the conversations were grand and sometimes... Language Arts, 71(7), 509-515.


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