Amid the aroma of pizza, adolescent chatter subsides and faces meet across library tables—another Book Club meeting is about to begin. Two remarkable and successful Book Clubs have been established at the Allegheny Traditional Academy, a school in the Pittsburgh Public School System. I am the library media specialist for a K-8 program that serves a school population much like any other urban, inner-city school.

Advocacy and Start-Up

Due to budgetary constraints, the library media center is open one day a week (Fridays) for middle school collaborative efforts and the other four days for elementary use. Our Principal, Jerri Lynn Lippert, Ph.D., and Vice Principal, Virginia Hill, emphasize academics, discipline, and service. During this past summer, the principal asked me to implement book clubs. Her requirements and recommendations were as follows:

- Meet during lunch periods.
- Serve pizza.
- Use my expertise in selecting novels.
- Create interest by working with Reading/Language Arts Communication Classes.

We are fortunate to have a parent on staff who supports activities and is involved in parent outreach. She designed and provided the invitations and ordered the pizzas each month. Our principals asked that books be returned before the selected books for the next month were distributed. A congratulatory note from Dr. Lippert and me was included in the first book. This note as well as subsequent invitations to Book Club meetings served as reminders and hall passes.

The staff was welcoming and curious about the Book Clubs. They helped me “talk up” the novels, disseminate materials, and collect student title requests. I discussed the required commitment, displayed some of the selections, and mentioned pizza to elicit a phenomenal and rousing response. Each grade level had thirty or more respondents, representing almost a third of our school’s enrollment! Ultimately, we established a seventh and two eighth grade book clubs.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools has implemented a READ 25 book reading policy for each student and requirements for this program could be partially fulfilled through the Book Clubs. Our students were accomplishing their READ 25 goal without coaxing, and they were having FUN doing it!

Adolescent Acceptance through a Literary Community

The Book Clubs provided many rewarding experiences. One of the greatest rewards was the positive way students viewed one another and me. These clubs helped build a sense of community and garnered respect for those students who previously may never have been befriended or noticed. It was also re-

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warding to see students participating and freely expressing their opinions. The boy they might have labeled “nerdy” leveled the playing field when he spoke artfully about the novels, picking up subtleties, finding character flaws, and continually engaging his peers. His parents stopped me at the spring concert and marveled at the confidence and fulfillment he had gained through participation in the Book Club and from approval by peers. Then there was the unique young lady who struggled with emotions and conflict in fifth grade, but blossomed into a respected thinker, initiator, and leader of discussions.

There were also glimpses of remarkable talent, potential, and brilliance in a third student, a girl, when she attended the Book Club meetings. She could have easily conducted every discussion by herself. Her overall attendance in school was plagued with absences and some suspensions, but she made a huge effort to attend Book Club meetings, and they were some of her biggest successes. I must compliment the teachers too. Because of their teaching, students made the connection of “irony” quite comfortably and excitedly pinpointed “situational irony,” which floored me. Some teachers even read our titles during D.E.A.R. (Drop Everything and Read) time to their students.

Our Book Clubs invigorated literature outside of the classroom because of the natural discussions as well as the non-graded approach and freedom from curricular pressures. Students felt a sense of accomplishment when they finished the books on time. Participation in discussions was self-fulfilling and dialogue was always free from criticism that can sometimes pepper in-class discussions among adolescents. Students learned to respect each other’s opinions.

Discussion and Dialogue

The eighth graders read seven books and the seventh graders read six books during the school year. All eighth grade members were given their own copies of *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, our Book Club favorite. We also included a written note inside the book congratulating them on their promotion to high school and acknowledging their contributions to the Book Club. Both Book Club levels read *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by Roald Dahl. The movie had just been released which added interest and the book had depth needed to draw students to join in and to spark conversation. Though some members saw the movie, it was clear that they did not simply watch the movie rather than read the book because they discussed the book in great depth and with tremendous enthusiasm. The same was true of *War of the Worlds*. They realized that participation in discussion required knowledge of the book not satisfied by watching the movie.

Book Club meetings were always begun with an ice breaker. I then asked a set of questions unique for each book. With each successive book, students answered questions more insightfully and with “richer” analysis, delving into character eccentricities and motivations. Examples of the basic discussion questions for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were as follows:

- Ice Breaker: How did you feel about this book?
- Was this book just about fantasy and candy?
- How did you like the families? The children?
- What qualities of society did each family represent or embody?
- How were Willie Wonka’s candy-making processes innovative?
- Are there examples of science and/or technology in this book? How are they used?

These questions helped encourage students to find the deeper social statements underlying the story. I found that it was important to let students digress as they devised unique interpretations or overarching themes. The more students were involved, the richer their dialogue. Opinions abound and heartfelt truths expose inhumane, unfair, or dysfunctional behavior, especially when the underdog is of school age. Bibliotherapy, the personal act of relating, understanding, and experiencing through a book, is extremely important to the “whole” student.

Members of the Book Clubs found that responding to the questions became easier and discussion more comfortable and interesting as we progressed through the

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**They respected each other.**

**Peer pressure was not an issue.**

**They impressed one another.**

**They formed a community.**

**They were very positive.**
novels. Students ran the gamut of student personality styles: the high achiever, the athlete, the slacker, and the class clown. Their personalities ranged from nice to noisy to shy or sophisticated.

Just like the members, the chosen books should have unique features. Two of the selections were from the science fiction genre. A Wrinkle in Time by Madeline L'Engle was chosen because it is timeless, beloved, and award winning even though it is not always recognized in lieu of newer titles. Even though it was challenging for some students, the book has incredible and constant dialogue. I encouraged students to persevere through the more challenging parts by encouraging them to read a certain amount of pages at a time. The complicated writing style stimulated discussion in spite of causing some students to struggle. Conversely, another science fiction selection, War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells, stayed in some lockers and there were some drop-outs from the club. It was difficult reading for middle school students, but most of them stayed with it. I explained to members that the author, a scientist, thought and wrote it on a technical level, therefore, the level of dialogue was more difficult than usually associated with fiction.

Two novels, Bad Boy and Crash, were chosen for the male slant. Bad Boy by Walter Dean Myers is set around the time of the Harlem Renaissance and is the coming-of-age, semi-autobiographical novel about the author. Crash by Jerry Spinelli is about completely opposite schoolmates who happen to be neighbors. Crash is a celebrated athlete, an unrelenting bully, and the unfortunate son of absent, working parents. The other boy is a Quaker and vegetarian with older, devoted parents. Crash is the jock-bully who doesn't get the cheerleader, struggles without his Dad's attention, and experiences his biggest life lesson when he finally meets his match athletically—his neighbor!

The novel The Outsiders was unquestionably the favorite selection and was the easiest to discuss. The class wars, gangs, and violence written about in this book are surprisingly relevant to middle school students who shared their mature and pertinent thoughts. The issues raised in this novel continue to seriously affect our culture and our youth. Discussion flowed, and this book sealed the interest of our community of readers.

The Last Chapter

Book clubs give participants the opportunity to comfortably discuss and express a wide range of emotions and opinions. They provide a marvelous excuse for being with others while simply sharing books. The last book club meeting should include a survey asking members to evaluate their experiences and offer suggestions. Include a small gift or token of recognition to reward your students for voluntarily participating. This last meeting can be a great opportunity to share favorite books and thoughts!

Everything done in a good spirit will be perceived and received as such, both by the administration and the book club members.

Of course, what may well be the most important question: plain or pepperoni? Enjoy!

Note: There are upstart awards and grants available for book clubs and summer book clubs focusing on constructive free-time activities for children and adolescents. Non-profit supporters of book clubs as well as Internet searches will easily produce hundreds of resources for finding support and valuable information. See Use This Page! "How to Implement a Successful Book Club" (SLMAM, December 2006: 2).

Suggestions for Book Club Books:

- Flake, Sharon. The Skin I'm In. Hyperion, 2000.