Connecting with Boys at Lunch: A Success Story

Robie Martin

We all know the thrill of making “the connection.” It’s hard to match that rush you feel when you see the animated face of a student coming toward you to share how much they loved the book you suggested to them.

And when that face belongs to a student you are reaching for the first time, when you’ve found the perfect book for one of your toughest customers, you know exactly why you come to school every day and why you love what you do.

The luckiest among us feel at home in our schools and love being there. I am one of the lucky ones. Parsons Middle School proudly serves roughly 450 Grade 6, 7 and 8 students in our small southeast Kansas town. The school is comfortable, familiar. I was a student in the same rooms in which I now teach, and some of my colleagues were once teachers of mine. I know most of the families of the students I serve; in fact, many of my students are children of former classmates. So ensuring that the library is a place where students want to be is always foremost in my planning.

A newly renovated building and a flexible library schedule make that entirely possible. A little creativity and a welcoming atmosphere seal the deal.

Lunch Bunch was born from the notion that we needed activities to excite kids about the books they were reading and give them a forum to talk to one another about what they had read. Regular booktalks generate great conversation about the books I share with the students, but we never seem to have enough time to let everyone have their say. Holding monthly book discussion groups to talk about noteworthy titles seemed like a step in the right direction.

Lunch Bunch did not start out to be a “boys only” book discussion group, but from the inception of our monthly reading-and-eating meetings, it was soon evident that guys were going to dominate.

First, my middle school fiction collection boasts many great guy books. My own literary taste in YA fiction runs to the testosterone-laced titles, I suppose as a result of being the mother of boys. And making a connection with reluctant readers is a special mission of mine each year. Many times that means finding the perfect book for those boys who initially hide in the far corners of the library hoping the librarian won’t notice them. So yes, we’ve got guy books.

Next, it’s a basic law of human nature that food attracts boys. So when I announced that our library would soon be starting a monthly Lunch Bunch book discussion group, the stage was set to bring out the boys, who came to see if the food offered was good enough to skip the lunchtime football game.

Lois Lowry’s The giver was our first Lunch Bunch discussion book. At that first meeting there were probably as many girls signed up as there were boys. Each person was to be prepared to pose one question or discussion point to share with the group. The girls had done a better job overall of thinking about what they were going to bring up at Lunch Bunch. The boys seemed to be mainly concerned with getting a large enough piece of cheesecake. But everyone involved had a good time talking about a wonderful book and I felt pretty confident that word of mouth was going to guarantee even more Lunch Bunchers the following month. I was right.

What I didn’t expect was the enthusiastic advertisement Lunch Bunch received among the boys. When sign-up time came around the following month, there were more boys on the list than there were girls. And this was to discuss the book If you come softly by Jacqueline Woodson, very definitely a “girl” book in the eyes of most of my middle-schoolers. The following month, when Lunch Bunch featured Ben Michaelson’s Petey, again, the boys dominated.

A pattern had been established. More boys, fewer girls. They were coming for the dessert.

So now it’s a known fact that...
Teacher-librarians Share Their Successes with Boys and Reading

I offered a "Teens Read" book discussion group for students in Grades 6-8 last school year. I didn’t know what to expect for attendance but I only planned to run it for a couple of months in coordination with ALA’s Teen Read Week. I thought I might get a few girls but was amazed to end up with a core group of eight kids, six of whom were boys! One week, a boy and a girl actually planned a scavenger hunt based on the book. They had such a great time we extended it, by their request, to last through the school year. This year, the requests to start have already begun. To make the prep a bit easier, each participant and a partner will plan and lead the discussion sessions. I am looking forward to it too!

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Lunch Bunch is pretty much a guy thing at our school. There are always a few die-hard girls that won’t be put off by boys who think they own the library at lunch time, but that’s the evolution of our group at this time. There are a few rules involved:

- The book must be read in its entirety before a student may sign up for Lunch Bunch.
- The sign-up sheet is posted on the check-out counter in the library at all times.
- I get many copies of the upcoming Lunch Bunch title through inter-library loan and ask our Parent-Teacher Organization to fund the purchase of a dozen or so paperback copies.
- Students must present their Lunch Bunch invitation to their teacher, since it serves as their pass from class. If they haven’t signed up prior to Lunch Bunch day, they don’t receive an invitation.
- The students bring their lunches from the cafeteria into the library so that we can dine and discuss at the same time.
- The book for the following month is chosen by the Lunch Bunch group before we adjourn. I make sure I have some suggestions ready.

- The librarian brings an awesome dessert that makes missing the football game worthwhile.

We’ve had a few glitches to work out. A few brave souls thought that they could fake their way through a Lunch Bunch discussion by reading just the first chapter or two of the book. They were always “busted” by their peers who knew the books forward and backward. Word quickly spread that you had better know the book before you sign up. And we have to have the support of all of our teachers, as students miss at least part of a class to come to Lunch Bunch. Fortunately, the teachers believe in the program and always allow the students out of class.

Lunch Bunch has been a tremendous success in getting our boys to read. It’s had quite a ripple effect. The titles we have discussed at Lunch Bunch are guaranteed to be off the shelves and in the hands of kids the entire year. The boys have turned into great impromptu book-talkers among their peers. Students constantly suggest titles to me as possible Lunch Bunch candidates. We never have enough copies of the latest upcoming Lunch Bunch title. The guys are reading, reading, reading. And I have developed a pretty great collection of some killer desserts that I would love to share with my fellow librarians!

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