“I’m bored.” Every child has said this at least once in his or her life, and most say it almost daily. A cousin of mine with three children once told me that when her children are bored, they play the piano or pick up a book. She didn’t see a need to have the newest Wii or iTouch because they were just as happy doing other things.

I am a young teacher who dreams of a classroom filled with students with their noses buried in books. As I begin preparing for my first year of teaching, I have a vision of my 4th-grade classroom where I am able to find a way for each student to enjoy reading. I completed my student teaching with a 4th-grade class this past fall, and during that time I implemented literature circles. I completed a self-study research project with the findings that I was able to meet the needs of all students through a literacy program that fostered the joy of reading a good book.

My journey to create positive reading opportunities for children started long before my student teaching. During summers babysitting in high school, I found that more often than not children would pick up a book only to become distracted by other activities that seemed more exciting. I decided I needed to create an opportunity for kids to read in the summer . . . and enjoy it.

Three years ago, using adult book clubs as my model, I created two book clubs. After receiving positive feedback from parents and their children, I extended this to five clubs the next summer, and had ten in the third summer with 125 participants. The book clubs met once weekly for two hours at a time for the ten weeks of summer. Participants had assigned reading at home and, during club, we spent time discussing what we read, but more importantly, doing all of the creative and fun things relating to reading that teachers are forced to cut out of their curriculum due to time constraints.

I soon became passionate about the benefits of a book club setting in which kids can read with their friends without the pressure of getting a good grade. My priority was making sure participants enjoyed themselves while reading. While focusing on enjoyment, I helped make the characters come alive; I helped them make connections to their own lives; I created a safe environment where we could talk about sticky situations and peer issues; and I helped them find a passion for reading.

My other priority was helping parents see the importance of giving their children the opportunity to read for enjoyment, which actually took no further effort on my part. When parents saw their children run out of book club with smiles on their faces and enthusiastically spend the afternoon reading and writing down ideas to share with their book club friends, the parents instantly saw the benefit of providing his or her child with this exciting reading opportunity.

After completing my student teaching, I wanted to see how I could use book clubs in my future classroom. The book clubs I held in the summer were in an affluent town, and most of my participants were avid readers reading above grade level. I decided to embark upon an independent study to consider not only how I can implement book clubs in a school setting, but also how I could use them to reach a different
demographic such as students who may struggle in school academically and socially and who may live in tougher conditions at home. I received support from a resource teacher at an underprivileged school, and I called the program “Lunch Bunch Book Clubs.”

I held two book clubs during the lunch hour for a group of 4th-grade girls and a group of 5th-grade girls. I decided to only include girls because it was mostly girls in my summer clubs, and since I was starting small with Lunch Bunch Book Clubs, it made the most sense to have a homogeneous girl group. We met once a week for an hour each time. As an outsider, I asked teachers to select students they felt would benefit from the program. With the support of classroom teachers and school personnel, I immediately saw that I could implement the identical lesson plans I used in the summer with my Lunch Bunch Book Clubs at school. And, even more so, I would see similar wonderful results. These book clubs provided an additional safe environment for these girls who were struggling with appropriate social behaviors. They were not seeing a counselor. They were not being punished. It was just a chance to relax and enjoy positive interaction with peers, with reading at the center.

Research supports that collaborative reading opportunities that help build student self-esteem are necessary in our schools. Nancie Atwell (2007) explains, “When we teachers embrace our role as literate grown-ups who help children seek and find delight and enlargement of life in books, they have a good chance of growing into adults who enjoy and love reading” (p. 45). It is our job to make sure students are enjoying reading. Book clubs are one way to do this. It is important to note that not all students are motivated in the same way (McCombs, 1997). So, while a book club may work well for some students, that does not mean it will work for all students.

McCombs (1997) stresses that students need to see reading as playing, not working. Stressing the fun behind book club helps students to see it as an exciting social outing once a week, and not just another school assignment. Stringer, Reynolds, and Simpson (2003) highlight common self-esteem issues for students: “behavior, peer relationships, self-control, physical development, stress, dealing with feelings and emotions, and school success” (p. 69), and they stress that discussing these issues with peers is healthy for students. The books chosen for book club can center on these issues and can create a pathway for students to discuss hard topics.

So, you may be asking yourself, I have twenty-some students I am responsible for each day—how am I supposed to add one more thing to the lengthy to-do list already sitting on my desk? Or, I am a school counselor or resource teacher and this does not fit into my job description, does it? Or, I am a librarian. How do I single out small groups of students for this? My answer is simple: it’s easy. Anybody can find a way to lead a book club. There is no right way to do it. All you need is to see the value and purpose of the opportunity you can provide for children. Here is what I did, and here, in ten simple steps, are some of my answers for you.

**Step 1: Passion**

First, open your mind to doing something new. Have a positive attitude and go into starting your new book club with enthusiasm and excitement. Start small; begin by holding one book club and see how it works. Try to build a support group. Find other staff members in your building and have them run a book club, too. Both of you could even run one group together the first time.

**Step 2: Location**

Decide where your book club will take place. You could use the library, a counselor’s office, a regular classroom, the art room, the music room . . . anywhere that is open during lunch hours or after school. You could even bring cushions
and sit on the floor in the hallway. If you are running the book club during lunch, which helps avoid the issue of transportation or conflicts with other activities, have your students bring their lunches. I found that eating lunch together helps promote a relaxed environment. You may be thinking, “Wait a minute, I’m going to lose that extra planning time or good lunch room conversations with my colleagues!” Yes, you absolutely will. But I argue that it is well worth the time sacrifice.

Step 3: Participants

The first thing to do when choosing who will participate is to decide the need in your class or school. For my group, I requested that teachers recommend students who struggle socially. Think about issues you see with the students in your particular class or issues with the grade as a whole. Teasing, leaving others out, social anxiety, or lack of respect for adults are some issues to consider, just to name a few.

You could put together a mix of students. Converse with other teachers and school personnel to learn more about other students you may not know. Create a group where maybe one student is struggling socially, another is struggling academically, maybe one has troubles at home, or maybe you have a rock-star student who would help boost the self esteem of others. It can be a group of students who are already friends. It can be a group of students who do not even know each other. I have had both heterogeneous and homogeneous groups, and both work. There is no right way to decide who participates.

Step 4: Time Frame

Decide on the duration of your club. I recommend about ten weeks. Since I was doing it during the school year, I wanted to make sure the reading would not get in the way of schoolwork. We did all of the reading during our time together to avoid that issue. With my two clubs, one group was able to finish the story, and the other was not. I did not want us to rush through the book, but it is my hope that the girls will become engaged with the story and will finish reading it on their own.

Step 5: Books

I like to use a theme when choosing books. During the Lunch Bunch Book Clubs, we read books about bullying and being an outsider because this was an issue with the particular students chosen to participate. Choose books based upon the kids in the group. Consider asking for their input when deciding. We read *Dexter the Tough* by Margaret Peterson Haddix and *There’s a Boy in the Girl’s Bathroom* by Louis Sacharr. Both books worked great and sparked conversations that touched on a variety of issues. See Appendix A for a list of books I have used in the past to get you started with your book club.

Step 6: Resources

Talk to the school librarian and the public library for help locating books. In my experience, they are more than willing to help. In terms of gaining support from parents or school administrators, this again is where your passion and enthusiasm comes into play. When you approach them with this idea that you are excited about, they may immediately jump on board. If they don’t, develop a proposal that explains your purpose for a book club.

Step 7: Build Excitement

Once participants are chosen and other adults support the idea, you need to build up the excitement. Send participants a letter in the mail a few days before telling them how excited you are for your club to begin. You could print the note on fun paper, roll it up, tie a bow around it, and leave it on each student’s desk the morning
of the first meeting. A sample letter is included in Appendix B. It is also necessary to get permission from parents. Send a letter to parents the same day the club is first introduced to students. A sample letter is included in Appendix C.

Invite participants to bring something to share with the group, whether it is a snack or something they have made. You could ask students ahead of time to bring a picture of someone who is important to them. They could bring their favorite picture book to read with their new book club friends. You can even do something as simple as having students go back to the classroom and bring a favorite item from their desk. Book club is supposed to be fun, so keep that as your main focus with everything.

**Step 8: The First Day**

The messages sent on the first day are crucial for the success of the duration of the book club. Participants need to feel your excitement, but more importantly, they need to understand that this is not just more schoolwork. They need to know that they are not in the book club because they are “bad” at reading. Tell them that somebody chose them for the group because of how friendly they are, or because they love reading, or because they have so many great ideas in their head that you want them to share with others. Your participants need to feel special and know that you think they are valuable and important members of the group.

On the first day I like to simply read the back of the book to the kids and make some preliminary predictions about the story together. Then we spend the rest of the time getting to know each other. We play getting to know you games, the same types of games you may play with the entire class at the beginning of the school year. Some of my favorites are “I Connect,” “The Skittle Game,” and “Two Truths and a Lie.” Instructions for all of these can be found with a simple Internet search. I spend the first day setting the groundwork for a relaxing and inviting book club. My main goal is to leave smiles on the kids’ faces and have them counting down the days until our next club meeting.

**Step 9: The Remaining Days**

Throughout the book club, participants should begin to see that they do not even need you there. The remaining days are, if you will, a chance for you to model a book club for the kids. Facilitate discussions and show them how a successful book club works. The hope is that when you remove yourself from the picture, participants will see the value of a book club and want to have one of their own with friends. The remaining days are the time to help kids see that reading is a social event that is engaging and fun. It is your chance to show them that reading does not just have to happen in the classroom.

At each club meeting, I would begin by reading aloud to the girls. This gave them a chance to focus on eating their lunches. As they began to finish I would offer to see if somebody else wanted a chance to read. I always let the girls read until they were tired, and did not call on students at random to read aloud for the group. All reading was done voluntarily. Sometimes we would play a game with our reading, wherein every time we would get to the main character’s name, the next person would read. This usually only lasted for a few pages before everyone was in a fit of giggles.

Each participant had a folder that we decorated over the first few meetings with drawings and stickers. We also made book club bookmarks and friendship bracelets. The girls kept a journal and would write their ideas about the story, and then I would write them responses. We were more faithful with the writing at the beginning of the book club; by the end, the girls said they preferred to spend more time talking about their thoughts with each other.

The girls led our discussions each week. I did not prepare questions or highlight topics. Instead, I sat back and let them take the lead.
There is no reason to lesson plan for book club or to set a calendar for reading. Instead, let the participants make the plans. Ask them what they want to do and prepare each week like that. You are simply there as a facilitator, not the leader.

**Step 10: Share**

Once you create, facilitate, and experience the benefits of a book club, you can share the idea with others!

My journey with book clubs may sound like everything worked perfectly, but I definitely faced my challenges. When I ran book clubs during the summer, I had support from the parents. Their children came each week with reading completed; they were focused; and they were respectful. Of my school Lunch Bunch Book Clubs, one went really well. A group of five girls took the book club very seriously; all participated and contributed.

My other group was a struggle, however—for the girls as well as for me. Resistance and tension among the girls in the group were clearly evident. Since I was a volunteer who only spent a short amount of time with the girls, I was not able to get a clear picture of what was happening outside of the book club; therefore, my ability to help the girls work through these problems was limited. We used the book as a vehicle to discuss peer issues on general terms, but this book club was not as successful as I had hoped.

Although there were challenges, and although one book club worked better than the other, this experience taught me that book clubs are a great outlet for reaching out to students. I found that the girls in the one group clicked and were able to talk about several touchy subjects without me even saying much. Book clubs present an opportunity unlike most others offered at school. Thankfully, the teachers were supportive of my work and also saw the benefits. (In fact, my mom, a resource teacher, started using Lunch Bunch Book Clubs at her school as one more way to reach students who struggle both academically and socially.)

People read in their everyday lives. When adults read, we talk about what we have read with others, sometimes without even realizing it. Adult conversations center on things we have seen in newspapers, books, magazines, blogs, even recipes. Some of what we read sparks our interest and desire to share with others. Even when we are bothered by something we have read, or do not agree with it, we still talk about the topic with others. We do **real reading**. Book clubs are an opportunity to let kids do real reading, something that is often missing from the classroom setting.

**Resources**


**About the Author**

Jenifer Rank is a recent graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University. After growing up in Connecticut, she now enjoys life in the Midwest, living in Davenport, Iowa, while passionately teaching 4th grade at Southwest Elementary in Geneseo, Illinois.
Appendix A: Book Lists

Intermediate Grades
No Talking by Andrew Clements
Out of My Mind by Sharon Draper
Dexter the Tough by Margaret Peterson Haddix
Abby Takes a Stand by Patricia C. McKissack
Rules by Cynthia Lord
How to Steal a Dog by Barbara O’Connor
There’s a Boy in the Girl’s Bathroom by Louis Sacharr
Loser by Jerry Spinelli

Middle School
Tuck Everlasting by Natalie Babbitt
Worst Enemies/Best Friends by Annie Bryant
The Face on the Milk Carton by Caroline B. Cooney
Flipped by Wendelin Van Draanen
Among the Hidden by Margaret Peterson Haddix
Shug by Jenny Han

Appendix B: Letter to Participants
Dear ____________________,

I am so excited to see you today at Lunch Bunch Book Club! We are going to start by learning a bit more about each other. Then, we will take a look at our book before we play some fun games. Finally, you will get to start decorating your folder.

Please bring your favorite art supplies with you and a big smile on your face!

I can’t wait to see you there!

From ______________________

Appendix C: Letter to Parents
Date

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is ________________________, and I am ____________ (explain who you are) ____________. Your child has been invited to join a Lunch Bunch Book Club, which I will facilitate.

The group will be meeting once a week on ______________ during lunch. Participants will get their lunches and bring them to the book club.

During the book club, we will read a book about peer relations and social issues at school. Books will be provided. The book is ______________. Participants will keep journals and do various other activities during our time together.

I am an enthusiastic reader, and I am eager to share this opportunity with your child. Please provide your consent on the bottom of this page and return it to ______________________. Our first meeting will be ________________

Sincerely, _______________________

____________________________
Student Name ______________________

____ I give my consent for my child to participate in the Lunch Bunch Book Club.

____ I do not want my child to participate in the Lunch Bunch Book Club.

Parent Signature ______________________

Student Signature ______________________

Date ______________________

LUNCH BUNCH BOOK CLUBS: A MODEL FOSTERING THE LOVE OF READING 27