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BOOK CLUBS:
BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY AND IMPROVING LITERACY FOR UNDER-PERFORMING STUDENTS

Although literature has extensively documented the stereotypes of developing learning communities in schools through book clubs - especially to improve literacy - little is revealed about varied indicators of improvements, such as student self-identification, authentic dialogues, and transforming small groups into learning communities. This paper presents research findings that seek to explore the effect of book clubs on improving literacy and building a learning community among seventh-grade, under-performing students in Canada. This paper is contextualized through a thorough review of related literature and discussion of findings from classroom observations, and students' interviews. This paper indicates a positive, causal relationship between using a book club as a learning tool and building a learning community, to improving literacy. Keywords: Literacy, Learning Community, Under-Performing Elementary Students, Identity, Academic Performance, Authentic Dialogue INTRODUCTION This study helps to explore the impact of using a book club in building a learning community and on the students' academic performance. It explores the impact of reading in a social context among under-performing students and self-identification and offers further suggestions for new or improved teaching practices that may assist the learning and teaching of literacy. Two researchers met in a 'Communities of Learning' graduate course in the 2010 summer and were asked to conduct a research project. At that time, one of the researchers, Robert, was also teaching a summer school literacy course to under-performing grade 7 and 8 students. After sharing a personal anecdote about book clubs with the students regarding his own schooling at the time, the students became interested in establishing their own book club, the same way Robert was asked to do in his course. Since he had already read the students the picture book "Listen to the Wind" by Greg Mortenson, the students naturally were inclined to select his complete text, "Three Cups of Tea", as they had many outstanding questions. Robert was extremely hesitant to permit the students to establish a book club in order to gain their literacy credit for several reasons, but primarily he was concerned it would be a complete failure

given their gaps in knowledge in the Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education various literacy areas. He brought his concerns back to his graduate course. After reviewing the knowledge on book clubs, one of his classmates and eventually the second researcher, Dalia, asked Robert to be more critical about the situation he was experiencing with his students. Why was he so opposed to trying something new? Why did he believe that these students would not effectively manage the book club or experience success with this text, given their intense interest? Through a lengthy discussion and after great reflection, Dalia convinced Robert to implement a book club with his students and volunteered to help. The book club was implemented as an optional, additional task, and this is how the study began. This researchexplores the use of a book club in a classroom of students underachieving in literacy and how it assisted them in their re-identification which ultimately changed their reading, writing, oral communication, and eventually critical thinking habits and perceptions. It acts upon informed classroom practices and their findings in order to attempt to better understand the full spectrum of effects the book club had on the students. Furthermore, it addresses why traditional practices are failing to connect with students' learning strategies and realities although, further investigation needs to be conducted to examine the underlying reasons for these students'initial underperformance. This article reviews the importance of reading and writing for students and how a student's performance of these activities influences their identity and self-perception. It discusses the disconnect between research and practice with regards to remedial courses and the affect they have on students' identities. Furthermore, it explores how student identity impacts student performance; specifically, how students' perception and performance are closely linked and inform one another. Following this, it introduces current research on reading and writing, and finally, authentic dialogue and communities of learning and the impact the community has on its learners. RESEARCH QUESTIONS How does using a book club as a literacy tool assist in building learning communities that improve academic performances among under-achieving elementary students? • How does a small group become a community of learning? • How do the social dialogical interactions affect and shape learning? • Are there other unanticipated outcomes from using a book club? If so, what are they and how were they changed? LITERATURE REVIEW Current literature argues that transformative practice is important and necessary in order to help underachieving students engage with the literacy curriculum and to become successful in school. Students who are unsuccessful require different approaches and differentiated instruction in order to be successful. Unfortunately, the collection of current Book Clubs: Building A Learning Community and Improving Literacy. 25 research suggests a variety of different reasons as to why students are not engaged or successful,

but limited research exists that provides practical support for educators to help these students in the classroom. The research provides educators with limited concrete examples to implement and support struggling students. Thus, it is important to review current literature on the topics, Reading and Writing, Identity, and Communities of Learning and Authentic Dialogue to better understand how this paper helps educators support students struggling or underachieving in literacy. READING & WRITING Since 1997, there appears to be a shift of paradigms away from the traditional act of reading - that is reading independently and in isolation, to an intermediary model - where reading was shared between a few students as partner or buddy reading. Stahl et al. (1997) worked with classroom teachers to revise the traditional basal reading lessons from a more traditional directed reading activity format to a model that combines elements of shared reading, partner reading, and choice. The evaluation of the results of this model suggests that a fluency-oriented model of instruction produces significant positive effects on not only fluency but also word recognition, comprehension, attitude toward reading, and students' view of themselves as readers. (Guthrie &Alvermann, 1999, p. 55) Current research on writing dictates that reading and writing are not separable but instead linked. An individuals' identity as a reader informs their identity as a writer and vice versa. Language develops contextually throughout the engagement of the learner. What this means is that these skills should be integrated and taught in combination instead of in isolation as was previously done in traditional practice. According to the "Writing Development Continuum":

- Language learning takes place through interactions in meaningful events, rather than through isolated language activities.

- Language learning is seen as holistic, that is, each mode of language supports and enhances overall language development.

- Language develops in relation to the context in which it is used; that is, it develops according to the situation, the topic under discussion, and the relationship between the participants.

- Language develops through the active engagement of the learners.

- Language learning can be enhanced by learners monitoring their own progress.

The way in which children begin to make sense of the world is constructed through the language they use and reflects cultural understandings and values (Raison, Rivalland, Cowan, & Australia, 1994, pp. 5-6) 26 Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education But what happens when the reading and writing learning continuums are interrupted? What happens to these students? Arguably, they end up being labelled as underperforming students. This label is provided to them by teachers in a myriad of ways such as in their grades, their assignments, and through the way they are spoken to by teachers and other students. In reading and writing, there are numerous articles to

specifically address concerns of under-performing students. Most of the research indicates that students have significant gaps of knowledge and speculate why these gaps exist (e.g., poor attendance, lack of support at home or at school, disengagement), the research does not investigate the cause between self-perception and academic performance. Why is it that many students believe they cannot read or write? Why do they not see themselves as poets and authors?

Identity

Students are more engaged and prepared to learn when they feel they are represented in what is being studied in school; when their work reflects their lives, interests, and realities (Ligorio, 2010). A large body of research currently exists discussing the link between self-perception and academic performance on an overall level; however, much of this research does not specifically investigate the influence it has on literacy. The current research that does exist on literacy, simply stresses the importance of having a solid understanding and knowledge base in literacy, but neglects to provide tangible activities that can be implemented class-wide (Raphael T. E., Florio-Ruane, Kehus, George, Hasty, &Highfield, 2001) (Beers, 2003) (Bloom & Egan-Robertson, 1993) (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990) (Christie &Derewianka, 2010) (Ehri&Wilce, 1985) (Kweon& Kim, 2008) (Petrosky, 1982). In today's social and economic climate, it is imperative that our students are literate in all forms of text, in all areas such as reading, writing, and oral abilities (Giroux, 1992).

Communities of Learning & Authentic Dialogue

According to Alvermann and Phelps (2002) "creating a favorable learning environment in which students learn to respect and listen to each other is without doubt much easier to write about than to do" (p. 68). This favorable learning environment wouldn't be built without that connection between the students and their teachers when they feel that they are all like one family. Moreover, when they feel that they can express their opinions with respect to others. These communities of learning, as discussed above, allow for authentic and genuine dialogue which results in - statistically significant positive changes in attitudes, feelings and behaviours (Dessel, 2010). This claim is supported by - [q]ualitative data analysis [which] confirmed positive changes as a result of dialogue participation (Dessel, 2010). Authentic dialogue and learning not only influence positive changes in regards to attitudes about school, it can specifically and positively influence a students' attitude towards Book Clubs: Building A Learning Community and Improving Literacy. 27 reading and writing when those discussions are extended to include or focus on these topics respectively. According to Maurer, when permitted to engage in conversation, children could meet and construct understanding (Maurer, 2010), of any topic they chose and encountered in their daily lives. It is the collaborative dialogue that lead to this authentic learning and conceptual understanding of an idea, not the specific activity that students are asked to complete

(Maurer, 2010). Recent research shows, as demonstrated above, that authentic dialogue between and amongst students is imperative to their cognitive abilities, critical thinking, and sound, conceptual understandings (Polleck, 2010) (Maurer, 2010) (Ruzich&Canan, 2010). As book clubs create a space in which authentic dialogue can take place, they are a vital resource that can be used in our classrooms and in practice to induce learning within and around our students. This research then comments on how these dialogues can impact student performance in and outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, most of the evidence is anecdotal and inferred; data is not provided to support these claims or what the researchers used to measure this change was absent.

Research Design & Methodology

Our study uses an ethnomethodological approach, combining both phenomenological and narrative analysis. In order to ensure accuracy and reliability of the data, all recorded data was transcribed and coded and categorized. This combined qualitative approach focused on verbal and holistic information rather than numerical data or value; however, to provide support for this information, quantitative results have been provided for illustrative purposes only. The study included four research participants, all whom volunteered and were selected from a remedial middle school literacy course. Participants were not provided compensation; however, they were provided with a copy of the text. Participants, given their age, also had parental consent to participate in the study, and were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without repercussion and would still be permitted to keep the book. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms in order to protect their identity. PARTICIPANTS' PSEUDONYMS All participants were assigned a pseudonym in order to protect their identity and personal information. Rena: Rena is a reserved student. She volunteered for the study as she was interested in finding out more about the context of Dr. Mortenson and how he accomplished so much so easily. She found him to be a fascinating individual. She is willing to speak during small and large group instructions but rarely challenges peers' ideas or defends her ideas when challenged by others. In writing, she tends to be very brief and has stated that she does not enjoy writing activities. Her writing scores are below the academic standard as measured by Ontario's Ministry of Education's expectations. 28 Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education Anita: Anita is a very quiet student who rarely if ever shares ideas orally during classroom or small group conversations. She has stated that she feels she has very little to contribute to these discussions and that her ideas often are not ready to be shared or are not worthy of being said. She also does not enjoy writing activities and her reading and oral communication scores are below the academic standard as measured by Ontario's Ministry of Education's expectations. Lena: Lena is an upbeat student who will share her

ideas in group discussions. She appears very artistic and prefers to show her understanding in various ways different that expected of her such as through visual arts instead of writing. She does not mind reading according to her initial response when asked but feels as though she is not a strong reader. Her oral communication grades are approaching the academic standard as measured by Ontario's Ministry of Education's expectations but her reading and writing scores are at least one full grade below. Sarah: Sarah is a very sensitive individual often seeking out how others are feeling and inquiring the reasons behind their feelings. She is easily affected by the mood of others around. She reads, according to her, because she has to but does not find reading to be an enjoyable activity. Her oral communication grades are approaching the academic standard as measured by Ontario's Ministry of Education's expectations but her reading and writing scores are at least one full grade below.

Findings

After conducting our research, our findings demonstrate that book clubs have direct and indirect positive outcomes. To better explain these outcomes, below is a concept map to detail our research. Using book clubs as a learning tool has a direct and positive impact on building a learning community. When learning communities are established as supportive and encouraging, they have a positive impact on students' academic performance and selfidentification. Figure 1. Conceptual map of relationships within the research variables Book Clubs: Building A Learning Community and Improving Literacy. 29 So, how does using a book club as a literacy tool assist in building learning communities that improve academic performances among under-achieving elementary students? To better address these questions, our research findings have been divided into five areas: small community of learners, large community of learners, social interactions and performances, identity, and academic performance.

Small Community of Learners

After completion of the book club, a significant observation regarding the members of the book club (the small community), was noted by the researchers. Students appeared to undergo a transformational change in attitude both within the book club and within the larger class community. Inside the book club, students' attitudes had a positive transformation. Initially, students were reluctant and shy not wanting to share ideas or discuss the book. They sat in a traditional sense, one student per chair, feet on the floor. Towards the end of the book club, students demonstrated a positive change in attitude and behavior noted by the observers when seen sitting on desks, sitting on each others' legs, playing with each others hair, talking with one another in rapid succession instead of waiting and raising their hands, and without waiting for instructor's prompts. Outside of the book club, the students became collegial with one another calling each other at home, and making plans to socialize that did not include the

book club. Anita [Regarding her initial experience in the group]: I felt invisible in the group. At first, we didn't really know anyone, it is just like we knew about five students and then when you like get to know them from the book club you like know who they are and their personality … in recess we didn't usually talk but when we started the book club, then we kind of knew each other and we started to talk about the book and then in recess time, we started like to talk to each other when we have free time.

Large Community Of Learners

In addition to impacting the smaller group, the book club appears to have an impact on the broader classroom community, in which it was situated, as well. Following the study, members of the book club displayed a greater level of confidence speaking in the class. This was observed by the number of times they independently offered to share their ideas and participate in whole-class discussions. The quality of their ideas shared appeared to be well-thought out and logical compared to their previous whole-class responses which seemed scattered and hesitant. This lead to a richer, deeper,and more meaningful whole-class discussions. 30 Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education Lena: I got comfortable [speaking and interacting] around my classmates. Surprisingly, there appears to be a positive impact on non-book-club members as well. Non-members started to show interest in the book by asking questions about the story. Some students went as far as to ask to borrow the members' books after they had completed the story in order to read it themselves. These non-members were not known for selecting reading as a leisure activity both by their original teacher as well as their summer school teacher. Furthermore, non-members also began to direct questions and concerns, not only about the book, towards their peers and members of the book club demonstrating a perceptional shift amongst all students. All students no longer viewed the teacher as the gatekeeper of knowledge. They discontinued participating in their learning in a traditional sense where they only felt it was appropriate to ask and seek support from the teacher, to a more social model where they felt they could work collaboratively to seek and explore ideas. By seeking out and enlisting book club members to support them in their quest for new knowledge and understanding, non-members demonstrated a shift in perception from the old model to a social model of learning since the members of the book club had become experts of the book and literacy and were viewed accordingly.

Social Interactions & Performances

As previously discussed, positive impact on both members and non-members took place following the book club. Students learned about their selves as well as each other. Rena: I learned new things about myself and others … [i]f I think I have a good point I share it … [book clubs] help you participate more in class discussions … For us in summer school, we didn't really know anyone, it

is just like we knew about five students and then when you like get to know them from the book club you like know who they are and their personality

Identity

Over the course of our research, members of the book club experienced and demonstrated a transformative perception of self and their self-identification. Initially, members of the book club shared that they were not readers and writers, that they didn't like these activities, and believed they were not able to complete activities that involved these skills with any degree of success. Following the book club, these same students felt as though they could read and write successfully. They gained a significant amount of self-confidence and no longer believed they were under-performing or under-achieving as they were labelling upon entering the summer school program. The students now felt that they could attempt most of the work that they had and would be presented with in school and, outside of school. They began to enjoy literacy rich activities such as reading to a relative and keeping a journal or diary. The lens in which these students used to view their selves was completely transformed. Sarah said, "I enjoy reading to my own limit", while Anita said, "I did enjoy the book club. It was an amazing experience. I would organize a Book Clubs: Building A Learning Community and Improving Literacy. 31 book club [in my own school]." "I would love to participate in this [the book club] again if it was in a regular classroom", shared Rena.

Academic Performance

The study found a significant improvement in the students' grades in all areas (Figure 2). The academic performance after the book clubs showed almost a full letter-grade improvement in all literacy areas compared to the beginning of the club. Furthermore, a study, including 50% of the original participants, was conducted approximately one year later (Late Winter 2011). The students' perception of self and academics appeared to remain positive. These participants shared that they were implementing similar high-yield strategies learned in book clubs, in their classes and with their schoolwork (i.e., collaboration, organization, initiative, communal learning outside of the classroom). Most notably, they had become empowered to advocate for themselves, which they had not felt comfortable doing before. Rena: my marks are improving I guess for reading and writing and just like oral marks … They really were Cs maybe C- or C+ and they went like to high Bs. Anita: for me my reading and writing marks have improved because last year I got like high Cs. Now I am getting high B's because in summer school [book clubs], I learned how to answer questions and we do that a lot this year. My oral marks had increased too. Participant Strand Grade (before book clubs) Grades (after book club) Reading D or 54-56% B- or 70-73% Anita Writing D or 54-56% C or 64-66% Oral comm. C or less B- or 70-73% Reading C- or less B or greater or 74%-79% Rena Writing C- or less B or greater or 74%-79% Oral comm. C- or less B or

greater or 74%-79% Reading D or 54-56% B- or 70-73% Lena Writing D or 54-56% C or 64-66% Oral comm. C or less C or 64-66% Reading D or 54-56% C or 64-66% Sarah Writing D or 54-56% C or 64-66% Oral comm. C or less B- or 70-73% Figure 2. Chart shows the students' academic performance before and after the book club 32 Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education ELEMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES Analyzing our data and speaking with students provided us with five key elements necessary for starting an effective book club: choice, structure and format, collective establishment, collective and collaborative learning, safe and comfortable environment. Although separated for our discussion purposes, these areas are interconnected and directly relate and impact one another. CHOICE Students were given multiple choices throughout the study, which led to higher engagement and accountability. From the beginning of the study, where students were given the option of joining the group and participating how they felt, to selecting the text and how they felt it was best to demonstrate their understanding, students choice is imperative to student success. This is true for most students, especially students who are struggling learners as it allows them to re-engage with school and academic work, and form a new identity for themselves. Make sure when starting a book club that students have as many choices as possible.

Structure & Format

In addition to choice, students admitted to appreciating a unique and non-traditional format and structure of the club. They enjoyed collaboratively establishing deadlines for when they would read sections of the book, collaboratively deciding on the task to demonstrate their understanding, and they simply appreciated that it was 'different' and 'relaxed' when they came to book club. They were not forced to sit at a desk, write every response, or read chapter by chapter. They were encouraged to bring snacks as well as encouraged to enjoy the snacks that were brought while in the book club. One way to include choice in your book club is to ask students how they feel the book club should run. When and where should you meet? How long should each meeting be? What should everyone bring (or not bring) to these meetings and why? As educators, we recognize the difficulties in requiting control of the structure and format of classroom activities, try to step back and allow for student input. It will help to reaffirm your role as a facilitator which is integral to this process.

Collective Estabilishment

The students felt it was necessary and important to decide on deadlines and tasks collaboratively. It gave them a timeline in which to organize their time but it also made them accountable to the group, their friends, and their selves. As teachers, we often feel pressured by timelines and due dates. Recognizing the importance of these pressures, join in the conversations with your book club and try sharing your concerns about them with Book Clubs: Building A Learning

Community and Improving Literacy. 33 the students. As a group, this will provide an opportunity to discuss important issues external to the book club and allow all members to feel included.

Collective & Collaborative Learning

The students identified how important it was to read the book together and talk about their ideas, questions and concerns on an on-going basis. This allowed them to check in with one another to make certain they understood the narrative and to correct any misconceptions with each other. They sometimes shared similar questions that they were able to solve as a group simply through their conversations at book clubs. Other times, they would pose a question and argue over opinions, referencing the book to support their ideas. As a facilitator, allow and encourage students to bring in outside questions into the discussion. In our group, one member brought in the effects of 9/11 and how that would impact the book. From an outsider's perspective, this may seem off-topic and a 'waste of time'; however, it led to a rich discussion that impacted their understanding of the text. Don't be afraid when students ask unrelated questions. Be prepared to say that you do not have an answer or ask for clarification for how the question is important to the group's discussion and purpose. SAFE & COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT Although the participants did not reference this element directly, indirectly they mentioned how they finally found a space they could ask questions without being laughed at. They no longer

concerned about sharing ideas. No matter how on or off-track their thoughts and ideas were, the group was supportive and assisted them in making sense of it. More often than not, students admitted having a dialogue about their ideas assisted them in better understanding the text. More importantly, students admitted that these different thoughts were used to help improve someone else's understanding within the group. Concerns about teasing, feeling embarrassed, unworthy or less than other people and their ideas, no longer existed. As a facilitator of a book club, ensure that students engage in rich, authentic conversations without mocking or teasing. Address any situation that a student is teased in immediately, with the group. During these situations, Robert has found it useful to include the group in the conversation about the actual teasing event itself. While reaffirming the importance and expectations of the other key areas, this discussion has also deepened students' understandings as to why teasing happens and why it is unproductive. It has also served to demonstrate how teasing is different from productive conversations in where members disagree on an idea.

Reflections & Limitations

Overall, the researchers believe the project and in turn, the research, was an overwhelming success and had a positive impact on those students directly and indirectly involved. However, a few outstanding questions still remain: 34 Canadian International Journal of Social Science and Education 1- 'What can teachers do to transform this knowledge

to other academic subjects? For example how would this work in a mathematics course? What would it look like? How would it be implemented? 2- What is the best format or structure teachers should use in implementing book clubs in regular classrooms? We recognize the average class size in Ontario is approximately twenty-six students.How will teachers overcome this challenge? What would a book club look like in a class that large? How will teachers access the necessary materials for this strategy? How will it be assessed? 3- How will teachers select the text to be used? Recognizing our study, all students were reading at similar academic levels, in a regular classroom, this is often not the case. How will teachers then meet the needs of all learners? For example, in our study, all students agreed on one text. In our class, our teacher provided a list of approved texts and we were asked to select our top two choices. These solutions may not be reasonable for the regular classroom teacher. 4- What is the role of mixed gender in participating in a book club? How would having different genders in the book club influence its results and outcomes? Although we suspect, based on our larger class community, it would have no negative impacts, since there were no males in our study, we are unable to make this conclusion. Book Clubs: Building A Learning Community and Improving Literacy.

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Տորոնտոյի շրջանի դպրոցական խորհուրդ, Կանադա

Մասնագիտական գրականությունը բավականին մանրամասն արձանագրել է դպրոցներում գրքի ակումբների միջոցով ուսումնական միջավայրի զարգացման կարծրատիպերը հատկապես գրագիտությունը բարելավելու նպատակով։ Չնայած այս հանգամանքին՝ շատ քիչ բան է բացահայտվել այդ բարելավումը ապացուցող զանազան ցուցանիշների մասին։ Վերջիններս ներառում են ուսանողների ինքնորոշումը, բնագիր երկխոսությունները և փոքր աշխատանքային խմբերը ուսումնական միջավայրի վերափոխելու գործընթացը։ Տվյալ հոդվածը ներկայացնում է Կանադայի ցածր առաջադի-

մություն ունեցող յոթերորդ դասարանի ուսումնառողների գրագիտության բարելավման և ուսումնական միջավայրի կազմավորման վրա գրքի ակումբների ունեցած ազդեցության ուսումնասիրության արդյունքները։ Հոդվածը հիմնված է համապատասխան գրականության, դասալսումների և ուսանողների հետ անցկացված հարցազրույցների հիմնավոր ուսումնասիրության վրա։ Հոդվածը ցույց է տալիս գրքի ակումբի՝ որպես ուսումնական գործիք կիրառելու դրական ազդեցությունը գրագիտությունը բարելավելու և ուսումնական միջավայր կազմավորելու վրա։

КЛУБЫ КНИГИ: ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНОЙ СРЕДЫ И УЛУЧШЕНИЕ КАЧЕСТВА ГРАМОТНОСТИ УЧАЩИХСЯ С НИЗКИМИ ПОКАЗАТЕЛЯМИ

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Профессиональная литература довольно детально документировала стереотипы развития учебной среды через книжные клубы в школах, особенно в целях повышения уровня грамотности. Несмотря на это, было обнаружено очень мало показателей, доказывающих это улучшение. К ним относятся самоопределение студентов, оригинальные диалоги и небольшие рабочие группы, созданные для позитивной реформации учебной среды.

В статье представлены результаты изучения влияния книжных клубов на повышение грамотности канадских учащихся седьмого класса и формирование учебной среды. Статья базируется на анализе научной литературы, прослушивании уроков и интервью со студентами.

В статье показано положительное влияние книжного клуба как инструмента обучения на повышение грамотности и создание учебной среды.